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Piero Karasu
Illustration by
Yuri Kisaragi
The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady

Anisphia Wynn Palettia
First Princess of the Kingdom of Palettia. Going on a honeymoon (official royal tour) with Euphie.
Euphyllia Fez Palettia
Daughter of Duke Magenta. Having become queen, she now seeks spirit resources to develop the kingdom. Has decided to set out on an inspection tour.
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The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady

“Beautiful?”
“E-Euphie, wh-wh-what are you…?!”
“So this is how you see the color of my eyes?”

"I would have helped you! If you had asked me, I would have helped you!"
"...I wanted to be a king who could help you."
Algard Von Palettia
Anisphia's younger brother, banished to the frontier as punishment for attempting to stage a coup d'état. Now lives quietly, helping his former subjects.

“Lycants must never forget an act of charity. So I shall protect Al.”
Acryl
A member of a race known as Lycants. Has a masterful sense of smell, strong enough to detect vampires. Wandered into Algard’s territory while on the brink of starvation.
“You have a strong sense of pride, don’t you?”

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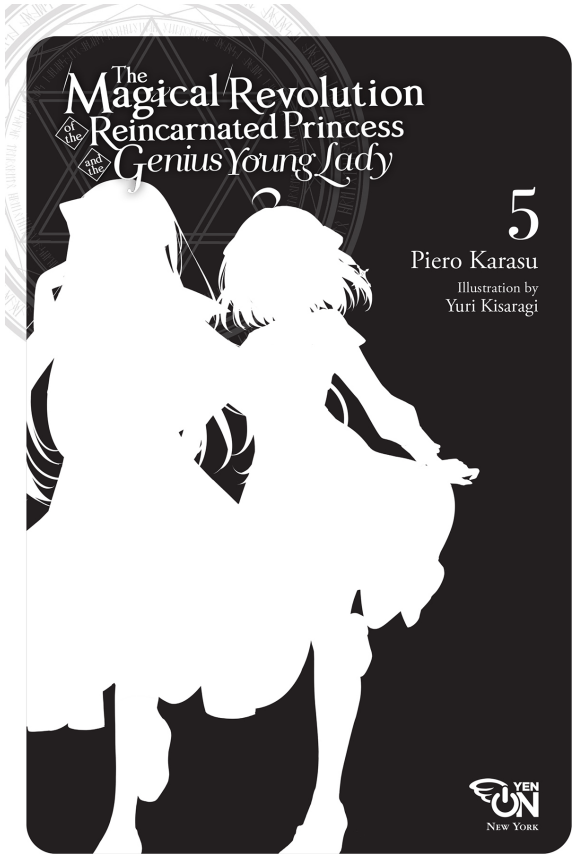
The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady
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Illustration by
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The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady 5

Piero Karasu

Translation by Haydn Trowell
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The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady 5

The Story So Far

Princess Anisphia yearns for magic and yet cannot use it. After rescuing the gifted prodigy Euphyllia from the commotion of her annulled betrothal, the two young ladies set out on new beginnings. With Euphyllia having acceded to the throne as queen, Anis is free to focus on her research. Meanwhile, Euphyllia arranges a birthday celebration for Anis in which new technologies are used to physically manifest spirits, leading to a reconciliation with the Ministry of the Arcane. Together with Euphyllia, Anis receives well-wishes from across the kingdom.

Characters

Ilia Coral
Anisphia's personal maid.

Lainie Cyan
Was at the heart of the incident in which Euphyllia's betrothal was called off. In reality a vampire and now a maid at the detached palace.

Tilty Claret
Daughter of a marquis, and a researcher of curses.

Orphans Il Palettia
Previous king of the Kingdom of Palettia. Anis's father.

Sylphine Maise Palettia
Former queen and Anis's mother.

Grantz Magenta
Duke. Euphie's father and Orphans's right-hand man.

Halphys Nebels
One of Anisphia's research assistants. Daughter of a viscount.

Gark Lampe
One of Anisphia's research assistants.
An apprentice at the Royal Guard.

The Story So Far

Piero Karasu
Illustration by Yuri Kisaragi

Two months had passed since Euphie's accession to the throne.

Now that she was queen of Palettia, she was hard at work advancing her reforms alongside my father, my mother, and Duke Grantz.

On the other hand, I—Anisphia Wynn Palettia—had finally had a chance to settle in.

Before Euphie's ascension, I used to meet regularly with the various nobles who belonged to Duke Grantz's faction, but such meetings had become noticeably less frequent. After all, there was no longer much chance of my ever becoming queen.

As such, my next task was to spread knowledge of magicology and magical tools.

However, Euphie maintained that it was too soon for me to take the initiative on that front, and that she needed more time for her preparations first.

"Henceforth, as queen, I will lead the way in further introducing magicology and magical tools. However, our preparations are still lacking, and if Anis acts suddenly, I expect whatever happens next will happen rapidly. I think we should have a grace period for the nobles to come to terms with and accept your innovations first."

"Um… What does that mean, exactly?"

"Take a break for a short while, Anis. Until the kingdom is ready, take some time to stretch your wings and regain your strength."

She had been smiling at me with true joy. In short, she had urged me to take some time off until she had laid the groundwork for the introduction of magicology and magical tools.

I'm sure she simply wanted to give me a chance to rest, but I had become so used to constantly working that the break just made me feel restless.

And that was why I was focusing my attention on new research that I hadn't yet been able to get around to. At first, Euphie had doubted whether I was intending to take a reprieve at all, but she eventually accepted my actions, albeit with resignation. They were so typically *me*, she had remarked with a light smile.

I might have been spending my days immersed in my hobbies,

but that didn't mean that I was without work of any kind. I was still receiving invitations to attend evening parties and so forth.

And today I was due to attend one such event.

* * *

"Tonight's evening party is being held for the express purpose of letting you meet and greet students from the Aristocratic Academy."

"So…they're inviting guests to help inspire the students, so they can get ideas for possible career paths after graduation, yes? Seeing as the academy is normally a closed environment, right…?" I asked Halphys as we waited to enter the venue.

"Yes, that is correct," she responded.

Halphys seemed to have gotten used to working by my side and always helped to explain things to me clearly and concisely.

"Your Highness will attend tonight as an advocate of magicology. If any of the students show an interest in the field, we would be most grateful if you could talk to them about it."

"So we're hoping to scout young talent, huh?"

"Queen Euphyllia said that we're not to actively recruit anyone, seeing as the purpose of this event is just to engage in friendly exchanges. It will be sufficient to note if there are any promising students among those we meet."

"Heh…I'm not very good at that…," I murmured wearily.

"That's why I was assigned to assist you. You should try to relax, Your Highness, and act naturally," Halphys said with a giggle. "There's no need to be nervous."

"Hmm. Why do I feel like evening parties exist only to give me stiff shoulders and force me to put up with boring conversations…?"

"You *are* bad at socializing…"

"Times have changed, and I don't hate these events as much as I used to. But I'm still hopeless at them."

But if I said that I couldn't socialize just because I wasn't good at it, my mother was terrifying when she tried to drum all the right etiquette and manners into me. If I wanted to avoid experiencing that again, I had to give it my all.

Then again, as Halphys said, there was no need to feel so tense today. I was just one of several guests, not the main attraction… Or

so I thought.

Halphys's eyebrows rose. "The reactions of the noble students may be divided, but the commoners who entered the academy on special programs will be paying attention, don't you think? Your recent achievements include defeating a dragon, performing aerial dances, and manifesting spirits with magicology-based musical instruments. You've done great work."

"Ugh…"

"Queen Euphyllia has publicly announced that she will promote magicology as one of the kingdom's core policies, and public opinion of you, Princess Anisphia, has changed for the better. You should probably be ready to be ambushed from all sides."

"I'm no good at seeing people's real intentions, though… And I don't like being praised constantly, either…"

"You'll have to get used to it, then," Halphys said with a wry grin.

With that, it was our turn to step inside.

The venue was the Aristocratic Academy—the same building, in fact, that I had plunged into atop my Witch's Broom just as my brother, Allie, had publicly called off his engagement to Euphie.

After noting that the window had since been repaired, I took a look around the hall.

The nominal purpose for this gathering was to help the students meet representatives from the various departments of the royal palace, so most of the participants were younger than I was.

Many of those students were watching me with curious glances, leaving me uncomfortable and unsure whether I ought to smile back at them.

We were the final guests to enter the hall, so the master of ceremonies soon declared the event underway.

The orchestra began to play, and the guests started their mingling. Among them was a flood of students who rushed to my side.

"Princess Anisphia! Tell us more about how you bravely slew the dragon!"

"Please, Your Highness! You've announced several new magical tools that allow people to fly! Won't you tell us how they work?!"

"I was there when those spirits were manifested! They were so beautiful!"

"U-um, yeah. Thanks."

I was overwhelmed by the students, swarming around me like tiny fish chasing after food in the water, but I did my best to answer their questions.

Halphys was by my side, likewise busily responding to curious inquiries and former acquaintances from the academy stopping by to say hello.

This certainly isn't easy…

My forced smile nearly faltered under the pressure, but I continued to respond to one question after another. My cheeks couldn't take much more of this. I gave Halphys a silent signal, and she responded with a small nod.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I'm a little thirsty. We'll have to leave you all for a moment," she said.

With that, the students left us with polite bows, and we moved to secure our drinks.

"Th-that was hard work…!"

"Well done, Your Highness."

"I'm glad they're all so friendly, but I don't know what to do when they all flock to me like that…," I remarked with a sigh.

Halphys let out a chuckle as she handed me a drink.

"Is there anywhere we can go to catch our breath?" I asked.

"How about over there by the wall?"

"Right. Good idea."

A young man began to approach as we made our way to the wall, and something about him struck a chord in my memory.

He had deep reddish-brown eyes and a strong gaze, but it was his silver hair that touched something in my memory. He was slender but not skinny, with a unique sharpness about his body.

Perhaps having noticed me, the boy reacted slightly in surprise. The next moment, he offered me a bow, his blank expression masking his emotions.

"Princess Anisphia, Your Highness. How are you? Are you with Lady Nebels here?"

"Yes. I don't believe we've met. I'm Halphys Nebels. Caindeau Magenta."

"…Ah."

Once Halphys had said his name out loud, I was able to place him.

Of course he had seemed familiar—he was Euphie's younger brother! Considering his age, he must have entered the academy

shortly after Euphie's graduation, so it wasn't at all strange to find him here.

But all the same, I had no idea how to respond to his sudden appearance.

I had long enjoyed close relationships with Euphie and other members of Duke Magenta's family, but for one reason or another, Caindeau's path and mine had never crossed.

Besides, I remembered Euphie saying something about having had a disagreement with him some time ago, but I had never learned what exactly had occurred between them.

My thoughts were all over the place, but first things first. I ought to start with a simple greeting.

"Master Magenta, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm Anisphia Wynn Palettia. I owe your father, Duke Magenta, a great deal."

"Yes. I've heard about you from him, too." He responded with a safe greeting of his own.

…And so we faced one another with equally inscrutable expressions.

I had lost my chance to control the flow of the conversation!

While I was racking my brain about what to ask next, Halphys interjected, "You started at the academy this year, didn't you, Master Magenta? How are you finding things?"

"To be honest, there have been a lot of problems. The Aristocratic Academy is in the middle of changing to a new academic system, and as the heir to the House of Magenta, I always have to be prepared for anything…"

"I doubt you have anything to worry about," I said. "I can tell you're your father's son. With experience, I'm sure you'll make a fine successor to his name and title."

I was being serious. Caindeau's eyes widened at this commendation, though he quickly schooled his expression into something more neutral as he offered me a slight bow. "Thank you. I'll do my best to live up to your high praise."

"Yes, please do. I can't wait to see what you accomplish."

I would have been happy to end the conversation there, but Caindeau's expression suddenly clouded over. That was worrying; I couldn't just leave.

"…Princess Anisphia. Is Her Majesty Queen Euphyllia in good health?" he asked me with concern.

I felt a pang of sympathy for him, having to call his sister by that title. But I did my best not to let that show.

"Yes, she's in excellent health," I answered. "She's busy, but she tells me that she finds every day fulfilling."

Too full sometimes, though—to the point that her activities eat up all her time.

Stop! Now wasn't the time for that. Stop thinking about this! I just wanted her to go easy on me for once! If she drained me of all my magical power, I wouldn't be able to move!

Yes, I would recover after a good night's rest, but that wouldn't help with the lethargy that I would have to endure the next morning!

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," Caindeau remarked.

"Shall I tell her you asked after her?" I suggested.

"…No, that won't be necessary," he answered after a short, worried pause. "I'm now just one of her many subjects, and a student at that. This isn't anything for Her Majesty to concern herself with."

"…I see."

"Princess Anisphia. Lady Nebels. Have a good night. Please excuse me."

With a dignified bow, Caindeau turned and left. I could only stare after his turned back as he faded into the crowd.

"Princess Anisphia…," Halphys began, glancing at me worriedly.

"…I'm all right. Meeting him just had me thinking, that's all."

As I imagined his inner thoughts, a sense of guilt had seeped into my heart.

Even if Euphie's parents, the Duke and Duchess Magenta, had been accepting of her decision, what about her little brother's opinion?

He knew that it was his duty to accept her choice, but his heart might not agree.

Suddenly thirsty, I brought my glass to my lips. Funny; I thought this drink was supposed to taste sweet.

* * *

"Are you concerned about Lady Euphyllia's brother?"

“Yeah…”

The day after the evening party, I waited until Euphie had left for the royal palace and then consulted with Ilia about Caindeau.

“Well, Euphie was adopted into the royal family all of a sudden and then proclaimed as queen, wasn’t she?” I pointed out.

“Yes. So you’re worried that he might not be taking it well?”

“…Yeah.”

Ilia raised an eyebrow, her expression conflicted. “It’s certainly true that Lady Euphyllia has been through a great many changes on account of the kingdom and the royal family. Of course it weighs on Caindeau’s mind. And yet…”

“And yet what?”

“Well, it was the duke who set the conditions for Lady Euphyllia to become queen, who determined her future path, so to speak. She overcame them all and ascended to the throne as queen. So it’s only natural that her brother abide by her decision, irrespective of his own emotions about the matter.”

“That’s a harsh thing to say…”

“It’s the weight of the title of duke.”

The weight of the title, huh? Just as Ilia had said, the title of Duke Magenta didn’t just make one the head of a noble family—the Magentas were also of royal blood themselves, albeit distantly, and were often preferred as royal confidants and marriage partners.

As long as one bore that title, their every action would be scrutinized. It was harsh but inevitable. Ilia wasn’t wrong.

“But is it really all right to leave things as they are…?”

“What do you mean?”

“…Even if their positions have changed, Caindeau is still Euphie’s brother. Can they really live with themselves without worrying about each other? It just doesn’t feel right.”

“Lady Anisphia…”

“I know that their positions won’t allow it. But I don’t think it’s good to worry so much about decorum that you ignore your own feelings, either…”

I rested back in my chair, staring up at the ceiling as I let out a deep sigh.

“Agh, I’ve had enough already! Why’s it got to be so confusing?!”

I held my head in my hands, scrunching my hair in my fists. What was done was done, but I couldn’t stand the thought of this

tension lingering.

"…In that case, why don't you consult with Duchess Nerschell?"

"Do you think I should?"

"I'm sure the duchess has had more opportunities to interact with young Caindeau than Duke Grantz. If you want to talk about his worries with someone, she would be the best choice."

"Hmm, that makes sense. Besides, I've been wanting to have a proper talk with her… But what reason should I give to see her?"

"Can't you just say you want to talk about Lady Euphyllia? Isn't that enough?"

"But Euphie cut all ties with the Magentas, officially speaking…"

"In that case, why not say you want to meet in private? If anyone asks why, just say that it's a personal problem, so you would prefer to discuss it in person."

"A-are you sure…?"

"If Lady Euphyllia was to visit the Magenta residence in private, there's a risk she might be suspected of something untoward. But if *you* went, Lady Anisphia, I don't think the same problem would arise."

"Right. And I do want to tell Duchess Nerschell how Euphie's been recently. I'll go, then. I'll send a letter first to see if she'll let me visit."

And so I wrote a letter to Duchess Nerschell requesting permission to drop by.

Her response was almost immediate—she wanted to see me, too. And so I set off to the Magenta residence on a private visit.

“It’s been a while since your last visit here, Princess Anisphia.”

“Thank you for allowing me to drop by. I’m glad to see you’re in good health, Duchess Nerschell.”

In the drawing room at the Magenta residence, Duchess Nerschell, whom I hadn’t seen in quite some time, seemed as calm and relaxed as ever.

In fact, I was a little unsettled to find Euphie’s smile in hers.

“Your last visit was when you suggested taking Euphie to the detached palace, wasn’t it?” she asked.

“Yes. It’s been more than a year since then. Time really does fly, doesn’t it?”

“A lot has happened this past year, but Euphie seems to be doing well. Grantz is enjoying her company, too, I hear,” the duchess said with a chuckle.

My eyebrows rose at this last remark. “Does the duke talk about her at home?”

“When it’s just him and me. Grantz can be rather difficult, so I’m sure Euphie has her hands full with him sometimes. They’re very much alike in that respect.”

“Well, um, maybe they *do* both like joking around…”

Euphie occasionally complained to me about how unreasonable her father could be at times. However, it was clear that she didn’t really hate him. Perhaps she was going through a delayed rebellious phase and discovering her sense of defiance.

Still, if he pushed too hard, *I* would be the one to suffer the consequences, so I did hope that he would exercise discretion. I smiled anyway.

“…So? What business brings you here today?” the duchess asked.

Thinking that I might have caused her to worry, I adopted an apologetic tone. “I bumped into Caindeau at an evening party I attended the other day…”

“Did you now?”

“Um, I know it’s a little late for this, but I’m sorry for causing your family so much trouble…”

“It’s the duty of a retainer to serve his lord and attend to his liege’s heart. Besides, a member of the royal family shouldn’t apologize so easily. Sylphine will give you a good scolding, you know?”

“…R-right. I just can’t control my feelings sometimes,” I said with a heavy expression.

Duchess Nerschell, however, gave me a gentle smile. “And I don’t blame you for having them. It’s precisely because of that inner kindness of yours that you’re worried about Caindeau, isn’t it?”

“…Yes. I was just a little concerned.”

“So you went out of your way to visit me because you cared for my son?”

“That, and I wanted to have a frank talk. I know it’s selfish of me.”

“Selfish, you say…?”

“I’m the main reason why Euphie has ended up in such a complicated position. It’s because of me that she’s had to cut ties with her family. And that’s why Caindeau is hurting. So I’d like to help ease his pain as much as I can.”

“I see…,” Duchess Nerschell murmured softly as she breathed a sigh and reached for her tea.

I took a sip myself before addressing her again. “May I ask what you think of me?”

“What *I* think of you?”

“About the fact that I basically made Euphie leave the Magenta family, that it’s because of me she was adopted into the royal family and became queen,” I clarified with a tightness in my throat.

Duchess Nerschell didn’t respond immediately, instead taking another sip from her drink. The silence was so tense that the sound of her teacup clinking against its saucer set my nerves on edge.

“Oh-ho,” she chuckled at last. “I can say that your fears are unfounded, Princess Anisphia.”

“Unfounded…?”

“For my part, I always suspected it might come to this after you took her to the detached palace. The way she entered the royal family was a little different, that’s all.”

“But she had to sever ties with you all…”

“I pushed for her to join the royal family, too, so I can’t argue with the path she chose,” Duchess Nerschell said clearly.

I studied her expression, trying to gauge her thoughts.

The duchess's lips curved in a soft smile as she met my gaze head on. Her eyes were so strong that I almost couldn't meet them.

"Any child will eventually leave the nest. We may no longer be family officially, but we are still bound as vassal and liege. Our support will ultimately be of great benefit to her."

Duchess Nerschell's words left me speechless. No doubt she, Duke Grantz, and Euphie herself all shared in that sentiment.

But what about Caindeau?

"Caindeau is still young. Even so, thank you for thinking about him. No matter what regrets you might personally have," the duchess said, as though she'd read my mind.

"…Indeed," I answered awkwardly.

The duchess looked calm and tranquil, but she was frighteningly astute.

"Then I shall call for him. Please, stay as long as you need, Princess Anisphia," Duchess Nerschell said, instructing the butler to go fetch him.

"Thank you."

Not long after, Caindeau joined us in the drawing room. First there came a knock at the door, then a voice. "Mother? It's Caindeau. I'm here."

"Come inside."

"Yes, Mother… Huh?!"

Caindeau stepped inside, bowed, and then startled in surprise when he saw me sitting across from the duchess.

"Mother, what is Princess Anisphia doing here…?"

"Sit down first," she urged.

The young man, evidently confused, did as instructed.

"Caindeau. Her Highness stopped by because she's worried about you."

"She did…?"

"Well… It seems you expressed concern for Euphie during an evening party the other day. But you left without saying much, I take it?"

"You came to see me because of that…? I'm sorry. I must have let my feelings show. That was rather improper of me…"

"There's no need to apologize," I insisted. "I just wanted to talk to you about what you're really thinking."

Caindeau sat there silently, apparently waiting for me to explain further.

In fact, his expression reminded me of Euphie. There could be no mistaking that they were brother and sister.

"No matter what you say to me here, I won't disrespect your thoughts. I want you to tell me what you're feeling, Caindeau. You have concerns, don't you?" I asked.

He said nothing, but his face hardened. After a few moments, he finally said, "…If you'll listen, I'll answer you frankly. To be honest, I'm very worried. Especially since I don't understand what the royal family wants with my sister."

"Ah… Yes, I see."

"First, the royal family wanted her for marriage, and I still can't believe the way the former crown prince Algard treated her." He paused there, letting out a heavy sigh as he shook his head. "Then, she was suddenly your research assistant, Princess Anisphia. Your widespread reputation as a heretic notwithstanding. On top of that, she was then declared a spirit covenantor, then adopted into the royal family, and then proclaimed queen? It's difficult to accept it all when it keeps piling on without warning."

"Ah… I suppose it must seem confusing seeing it all from the outside…"

"Of course, I'm fully aware she chose this path for herself. It's not for me to complain. But what with our relationship changing so suddenly, I don't know how to act around her anymore…" Caindeau frowned, truly at a loss.

The more I heard, the more painful this conversation was becoming. Yes, it was unavoidable that he would think this way.

"It's natural to be confused, I think…"

"I appreciate your concern… To be honest, I did resent the royal family for a while."

"Unsurprisingly…"

"But the situation won't permit me to remain that way, which is why I don't know how to behave around my sister… Er, around Her Majesty Queen Euphyllia."

Caindeau's consternation had changed into a more distant look in his eyes, as if he were staring into some realm of enlightenment. I couldn't help feeling uncomfortable, and I watched on with reluctance.

"…Besides," he began.

"Th-there's more?"

"My greatest concern is for my sister's health. Is she all right?

I've heard what entering into a spirit covenant does to you. I know the path she's set out on."

His expression turned dark, his gaze falling on his clasped hands. I had nothing to say to that last part.

"I don't know what it means to become a spirit," he murmured. "How must it feel, becoming something other than human…?"

"…Caindeau."

"I only heard about it after the fact. I know there's nothing I can do. But she became a spirit covenantor without warning and then ended up on the throne. How am I supposed to react to this…?" he whispered mournfully, staring off into the distance. "My sister is gone. She's severed her ties to us, her family. Sometimes, I can't help but think, maybe she wanted to forget about us all?"

"Euphie…would never want that."

"But she still chose the royal family. She chose *you*. She must have been hurting after the annulment of her betrothal. And yet she wanted to devote herself to you so thoroughly she would even sacrifice her humanity… I can't understand it."

He paused there, unclasping his hands to brush his hair out of his face. A new vulnerability had entered his voice with those final sentences. This was how he was really feeling.

"I can't comprehend why she made that choice. Maybe I even blame you for it."

"…It's only natural to think that way."

"But I'm still her vassal. I'm not allowed to have these feelings, and if I do, I can't afford to let them be known. I'm sorry for troubling you, Princess Anisphia, with my naïveté and inexperience."

"Caindeau…will you hear me out?" I said in my calmest voice possible.

At this, he looked up, meeting my gaze. The strength in his eyes was a characteristic feature of the Magenta family.

Caindeau was Euphie's brother. No matter how much their relationship might change, that never would.

"I'm the one who set Euphie on her current path. She's helped me so much, and to me, she's irreplaceable. But in truth, there should have been an easier road for her. Maybe it wasn't necessary for her to enter into her spirit covenant or to break her bonds with her family."

"Princess Anisphia, there's—"

Caindeau began to speak up, but I held out a hand to stop him. “Of course, Euphie’s choices are hers alone, and I have no right to feel guilty about them. No, I should feel sorry for bringing about a situation in which she had to make such a huge choice. Maybe I should have taken my royal duties more seriously. There’s no doubt whatsoever that my actions and attitude are the main factors that led us to where we are now.”

As royalty, I should have put the kingdom first. But I didn’t, and now Euphie was paying the price for my choices.

Which was why I would never abandon her.

“This might sound strange coming from me, seeing as I’m the one who set this train of events in motion, but please don’t give up on Euphie.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I know this is selfish of me. Even if you can’t act as brother and sister out in public, I still want the two of you to be family. And not just you, Caindeau—Duke Grantz and Duchess Nerschell, too.”

I was looking straight into Caindeau’s eyes, imploring him to understand.

“I turned Euphie into a spirit covenantor, and she left behind so much because of me. I feel responsible for all that. But more than anything, I want her to be happy.”

Duke Grantz seemed to be doing well in that regard, behaving not as a father but as a vassal—though inwardly, he was secretly pleased with how much she had grown.

As for Duchess Nerschell, she was so generous and forgiving that she simply accepted everything as it came.

Under such circumstances, perhaps it was difficult for young Caindeau here to take it all in—even if that was expected of someone with his status.

“We can’t undo what’s done or pretend it never happened.”

No, there was no changing the past. But the future was still undecided. And my strength alone wasn’t enough to bring about the future I wanted.

Which was why I had to consult others, convey my hopes, and gain their support.

“So I think you can keep on thinking of her as your older sister, and I’ll make sure that bond is never broken. You can direct all your resentment and frustration at me, Caindeau.”

The young man said nothing, staring at me with a clenched jaw.

I didn't avert my gaze.

I don't know how long we remained that way. Finally, he looked down in defeat, heaving a deep breath.

"To put it bluntly, I'm not very fond of you, Princess Anisphia. I can't make peace with the fact that my sister made such a major decision for you."

"I can't ask you to separate those thoughts. I deserve your bitterness for what I've done. But even so, I want to keep moving forward with Euphie. She means the world to me. I've burdened her, I know, but that's all the more reason why I want to live up to her feelings and make her happy."

"…You want many great things."

"So I've been told," I replied with a faint smile.

Caindeau smiled back weakly, but his eyebrows drew together slightly.

"This time, I want to take responsibility for the future," I continued. "To make sure Euphie doesn't have any regrets or pain about what's happened. I want her to be happy. That's what I can do for her—sincerely reciprocate her feelings. And the happiness that comes to mind would include everyone in the Magenta family."

"…I understand. But I'm not quite sure what my sister is really thinking."

"In that case, I'll let Euphie know how you feel. Even if the two of you can't speak directly, I'll serve as a bridge so you can both communicate."

Caindeau closed his eyes, maybe thinking about how to reply. After a long silence, he slowly breathed out and gave me a soft smile. He lifted his eyebrows slightly as though he couldn't quite help himself. "…I still don't like you, Princess Anisphia."

"I'm sorry about that. I don't think I could bring myself to dislike you, Caindeau."

"Do as you like… I know this is sudden, but I have a request to make of you, Princess Anisphia."

"Of course. I'll do my best to grant it."

"…Please take care of my sister."

I inhaled. That straightforward request was full of love and affection.

"Please make sure she's happy as she sets out on this new path as a spirit covenantor. That's my wish."

"…I understand. You have my word. I swear it to the spirits."

His request wasn't one to be taken lightly, and I answered it with utmost sincerity.

Caindeau smiled with genuine relief at this response. There was a boyishness to his expression now, a reminder of how young he still was.

* * *

"…Anis? What do you mean, you went to the Magenta residence?"

Euphie had returned to the detached palace upon the conclusion of her daily political duties, arcing her eyebrows in suspicion.

Whoa, was she angry?

"Um, I'm sorry for not telling you sooner. But there were no problems, so don't worry."

"…Please explain yourself."

"I bumped into Caindeau at that party I attended the other day. He sounded like he was worried about you, so I thought it would be good to talk to him about…everything…"

At this, the wrinkles between Euphie's eyebrows deepened, and she let out a sigh as she rested a hand against her forehead. Had I given her a headache?

"You went out of your way for my brother…?"

"He was really worried about you. I told him you were all right, and that if there was anything he wanted to tell you, I promised to pass it on. So, Euphie, if there's something you want to say to him, I'll let him know, so just tell me. I hope I'm not being a busybody, though…"

"…No, but I'm supposed to act like I've cut all ties to my family. I thought Caindeau understood that…"

"Understanding it doesn't mean feeling nothing about it, you know."

"…Yes, I suppose you're right…"

"I'm glad we were able to talk. You might have cut formal ties with the House of Magenta, but I hope you'll still think of each other as family. Besides, you know better than to mix public and private matters, right?"

"Of course. But still…"

"In that case, it would be best if you could both get along. Even

if your position is difficult, even if there are obstacles, it doesn't have to be like what I have with my brother," I muttered, glancing down at my feet as his image rose up in my mind.

Perhaps I had at some level conflated Caindeau with Allie.

Maybe that was why I had been unable to help myself when I had realized what had happened between Euphie and her brother now that her position had changed.

"Anis…I'm sorry. I didn't stop to think about your feelings…," Euphie said, her expression turning apologetic.

Noticing her worry, I waved my hands to reassure her. "S-sorry! I'm not trying to say they're the same! I mean, if you wanted to see him, you could always sneak out and meet him in secret, right?"

"…That's true."

"You care about each other, so I would hate for you to grow distant because of a miscommunication. I can act as an intermediary… Ah, I'm making a mess of this, aren't I? Sorry…"

Euphie's expression continued to darken. I was trying to take a positive approach, but everything I said seemed to be backfiring.

Looking back, I realized it had been close to a year since Allie had left the royal palace for the frontier. And yet I was still unable to put my thoughts in order.

At that moment, Euphie wrapped her arm around my shoulders in a gentle embrace. "I understand. I do, so don't apologize. When you apologize, it makes me feel like *I* ought to say sorry."

"…Mm."

"I'll try to talk to Caindeau, when I get the chance."

"Mm."

"Like you said, Anis, we can make the time to talk. Even if we're no longer formally related, I still consider him my brother, and I want to see him become the next Duke Magenta in good standing. And I want you to help me in my future reign."

"That's a relief to hear… You're brother and sister, after all."

Euphie's hand on my back trembled slightly. But I had to say it.

I didn't want her to end up like me. That was all. That was why I had done all this for her.

…And I wanted to keep on doing things for her until she was spoiled rotten. Perhaps sensing my feelings, she drew closer to me.

She was a rare kind of person. So dependable that it was easy to lean on her all the time.

Allie…what are you doing now?

How was he spending his days after having been sent to such a lonely, faraway place?

CHAPTER 2
Isn't That Basically a Honeymoon?

A few weeks after my visit to the Magenta residence, Euphie informed me that she wanted me to join her at the royal palace, so I made my way to her office with Halphys and Garkie by my side.

Euphie was now conducting affairs of state from my father's old office, sitting in the same chair he used to as she prepared a document of some kind using a Thought Board.

By her side stood Lainie, having settled well into her new position as Euphie's secretary.

Several others were in the room—my father and mother, who were assisting her in political affairs, and Commander Sprout of the Royal Guard.

As I entered the room with Halphys and Garkie, the commander approached us with a smile.

"Gark! I hear you've been hard at work."

"Y-yes, sir! I'm glad to see you're doing well, Commander!"

"Ha-ha-ha! No need to be so formal, Gark, my boy!" the older man said briskly while lightly patting him on the shoulder.

It was a friendly atmosphere—but my father let out a weak cough to remind us why we were here.

"Anis," he said. "And Miss Halphys and Master Gark, I presume? Thank you for coming."

"Father. What's this meeting about…?" I asked.

"I requested that he join us to help explain. First, please sit down and make yourself comfortable," Euphie said with a smile.

Commander Sprout is here—does this have something to do with the Royal Guard? I wondered as I sat down on the sofa.

"I've been planning this for a while, but now that it's finally time to start putting it into action, I'd like to ask for your help, Anis," Euphie began once everyone was settled.

"Of course, I'll help however I can… What is it? Is that why Commander Sprout is here?"

"Yes, this relates directly to the knights of the Royal Guard. What I need your help with, Anis, is an official territorial inspection."

"Really?"

“Yes. But it won’t just be an inspection. It will also serve to test your Airdra and the prototype based on it—the horselike fliers. We hope to mass-produce those.”

“Ah, the Airbikes. Right, those will be ready soon,” I said, placing a fist on the palm of my hand in realization.

The Airdra that we had unveiled the other day was currently being adapted into a new model suitable for mass production.

I had taken only an advisory role during the design process. The design team had accumulated a good amount of know-how after making the Airdra, so I had left most of the development to them.

At the time, I had remarked that the new model resembled something called a motorbike from my previous life, and so the name *Airbike* had stuck. But that wasn’t important right now.

“The inspection tour will be comprised of me, you, Anis, and several escorts and caretakers riding on Airbikes. The journey will be a test to see how efficiently we can investigate far-flung areas using flying magical tools.”

“Right. Airdras and Airbikes should help considerably reduce travel time.”

“Yes. This time, we will be visiting the eastern reaches of the Kingdom of Palettia,” Euphie said as she brought out a map of the realm.

“The east?” I repeated.

Most of the kingdom’s territory consisted of plains, with a range of mountains tracing its northern and eastern edges. The southern end was bordered by sea, while the western side adjoined the neighboring country.

“The northern and western sections of the Kingdom of Palettia have become particularly well developed,” Euphie began. “In the north, the Black Forest at the foot of the mountains is being cultivated to thin out the number of monsters. In the west, they’ve been hurrying to develop new ways of defending the border.”

“The northern and western areas are stable, more or less, and there have since been moves to expand settlement in the eastern and southern regions,” Lainie added. “However, establishing communities and outposts in the south has stalled because of the constant challenges with the sea.”

“The sea is a real nuisance, huh?” I remarked, crossing my arms as I nodded along. “There’s the sea itself and all the monsters that call it home…”

“Aquatic monsters have an overwhelming advantage near the shoreline. But we still want to secure salt and other marine resources. Though the situation might be somewhat precarious, we intend to keep pushing on with settlement and reclamation.”

“That leaves the eastern territories, which haven’t been afforded much attention so far.”

“Well, it’s all countryside. Or frontier, from another perspective…,” Garkie murmured under his breath.

“That’s right,” Euphie continued, turning toward him with a nod. “If I remember correctly, the Lampe family holds territory in the eastern regions?”

“Yes. Ah, I’m not trying to say I’m unhappy with the way we’ve been treated or anything!”

“Yes, I understand. I’m simply laying out the present situation.”

Conditions in the east were similar to the north—foothills, forests, and mountain ranges—but priority had been given to developing the realm’s western and northern reaches.

The nobles in the east were required to serve as bulwarks against influxes of monsters from the border, with various lords and knights being deployed there to maintain the status quo.

“Currently, we’ve expanded the limits of human habitation in the east to the forests at the foot of the mountain range. However, compared to the Black Forest, the region’s resources remain underdeveloped.”

“So you’re saying that one reason we’re going to the east is to examine areas that could be further developed in the future?” I asked.

Euphie nodded.

It was certainly true that resources in the east hadn’t been exploited anywhere near the level they had in the Black Forest, even if conditions on the ground were largely similar.

If those resources could be tapped, the amount of spirit stones and similar materials at our disposal could be greatly increased.

“Ah, I think I know why you called me out here…,” Garkie began.

“I would have asked you to join as part of our entourage in any event, but it will also be helpful to have someone who hails from the east to join our party,” Euphie explained with a soft smile.

Garkie took a breath, his expression tightening.

“Given the increasing need for magical tools, demand for spirit

stones is expected to increase. However, further exploitation of the Black Forest and other resource areas poses significant risk."

"The deeper in you go, the more likely you are to encounter powerful creatures and individuals…"

"We've received information from sources familiar with the location that further reclamation won't be realistic. Especially the Black Forest."

"What do you mean, 'from sources familiar with the location'?" I asked. "Do you mean local people?"

"There's really only one person who fits that description…," Euphie noted. "Lumi."

"Ah. Well, if Lumi says so, I'm sure it's true."

Lumi was a spirit covenantor, one who had been alive for a long, long time. Right now, she was staying in the royal capital and had a habit of popping in at unexpected moments. Until recently, she had been living in seclusion in the Black Forest.

If Euphie had determined that it would be difficult to develop the area based on information from her, there could be no disputing it as far as I was concerned.

"So that's why you're thinking about the eastern areas?" I asked.

"Yes. Besides, I'm not personally familiar with the situation in our eastern territories, so I thought this would be a good opportunity to set out on a tour."

"The situation in the east, huh…?" Garkie murmured, crossing his arms. I couldn't tell what he was thinking just then.

I was familiar with conditions there myself, and I smiled thinly. "It's always been said that the eastern folk are strong and hardy."

"They've also been called roughnecks who lack political finesse and have been sequestered far away from the rest of us," my mother commented.

"Ugh, M-Mother…"

"It's true. To put it simply, they're valiant and stubborn and sturdy of character. And they're considered the best of the best when it comes to fighting monsters."

I couldn't help feeling a twinge in my face as she said this. She spoke lightly enough, but her expression was dark. After all, she hailed from the eastern nobility, too.

"They take pride in their bravery and courage. Yes, the defense of the west against foreign incursion is an important task, but

without our guardians in the east, monsters would have long since overrun the region," she said, letting out a deep, mournful sigh. "Yes, it was probably that great conceit, that they were the ones defending the country, that led to the coup d'état."

"That wasn't just their fault," my father responded dejectedly. "The coup was triggered by groups of bandits using magic to plunder and loot. It's hard to believe that nobles were ultimately the root cause there…"

If you asked me, as far as those magic-wielding bandits were concerned, they were an unavoidable consequence of the breakdown of the boundaries between the nobility and the common people.

As a result, the king two generations ago, my grandfather, had decided on a policy to raise certain successful commoners to noble rank, and the crown prince had balked at the idea. He had seized the throne from his father, and my own father was still ashamed of his brother's actions then.

It was no wonder that my mother's face had darkened at the mention of this topic.

That was because her family, the marquisal House of Maise, had been the leading noble family in the east at the time, and at the center of the coup plot.

After losing that political battle, the noble house was abolished, leaving only my mother behind. Now the family name remained only as her middle one.

Come to think of it…Father and Mother's love affair must have been tumultuous…

After all, one of them was the son of the legitimate royal family attacked in a coup d'état, the other the daughter of a great noble family instrumental in the rebel cause. Despite her many successes helping my father, my mother must have faced a storm of criticism at the time.

I would have loved to ask the two about how they met, but that was a story for another time.

"All the same, the eastern territories are still poor. They've been treated quite unfavorably…"

"A lot happened in the reorganization after the coup…"

There had been a great many large-scale "reorganizations" following the coup, including the demolishing of old noble houses that had sided with the conspirators, the replacement of family

heads, and the redistribution of fiefdoms.

As a result, the reputation of the kingdom's eastern nobles remained notably poor.

"There's always at least one or two people in each class at the academy who mock anyone from the east," Gark murmured, seemingly recalling past experiences.

"But we can no longer afford to ignore our eastern regions," Euphie said seriously, bringing us back on task. "The fact remains that they are underdeveloped and potentially home to just as many resources as the Black Forest, all waiting to be put to use. Considering that demand for spirit stones will continue to increase with the further development of magicology and magical tools, it is absolutely imperative to develop the region for future use."

"I understand what you're saying… But will it be safe to make the journey with such a small group?" Halphys asked with worry.

That was an important question. In the past, I would have been happy to fly alone wherever I wanted to go. But now Euphie had her position to think of. After all, she was queen. It was natural to be concerned about the possibility that something might happen to her.

Euphie must have been aware of our fears, as she flashed us all a wry smile. "Perhaps it isn't appropriate for me to say this, but if I'm being honest, I doubt there will be any problems so long as we have Anis with us. Of course, it would hardly be appropriate for us to go by ourselves, so we'll have an escort and attendants accompany us."

"That's why you called Garkie and Halphys here?" I asked.

"Yes. They will be our official escort, while Ilia and Lainie will accompany us as attendants," Euphie remarked.

Garkie straightened his back at hearing his name, his face stiffening.

Halphys, meanwhile, raised her hand, her expression betraying a slight mixture of anticipation and apprehension. "Um, does that mean each of us will be driving our own Airbike…?" she asked.

"We only have a limited number of vehicles at present, so I was planning for us to ride two by two."

"Euphie, you and I will take the Airdra, I suppose?" I asked. "That leaves Ilia, Lainie, Halphys, and Garkie. Four people, so two Airbikes, right? How many prototypes have been put together?"

"Three. But I'm thinking that the remaining one should be used

by a single rider. If something goes wrong, we may need someone to head back to bring additional support."

"So another escort? Is that why Commander Sprout is here?"

"No, my duty is to lead the Royal Guard. I would prefer to send one of my knights to join you…," the commander said with an embarrassed smile.

Just as I was wondering why he was acting that way, Euphie spoke up, her voice solemn: "There is a knight I would like to bring along with us, but I want to hear your opinion on the matter, Anis."

"Huh? Who? Someone I know?"

"The person I had in mind was Navre Sprout."

"…Huh?! Navre?!" I exclaimed, glancing across at Commander Sprout.

Navre was the commander's own son. He was also part of the group that had helped Allie denounce Euphie back when he had publicly annulled their engagement.

No way! My eyes opened wide in disbelief at the idea of bringing someone with that kind of background along as protection.

Commander Sprout gave an awkward smile as he shrugged his shoulders. "Parental favoritism notwithstanding, Navre has reformed himself since those troubles and has been dedicating himself to his duties as a knight. Though I do wonder if he's the right choice for such an important task…"

"It's not like I have any reason to object…but what about Lainie?" I asked.

She was my immediate concern. Euphie was the one who had made the suggestion, so she was no doubt fine with it, but Lainie's relationship with Navre was complicated in a great many ways.

"I'm fine. I've grown a little since then, I think. Besides, I also want to move on past all that. Probably Navre does, too…" Lainie's smile was vaguely sorrowful, but her gaze as she answered me was as firm as could be.

If she was so determined, I couldn't raise any further complaints…

"I hope that you will continue to lead the Royal Guard through my rule, Commander Sprout," Euphie said. "For that reason, I want to resolve any lingering ill feelings regarding Navre."

"So by appointing Navre as your bodyguard, you're saying that it's all behind us?" I asked.

Euphie nodded.

The ending of her engagement wasn't due to any kind of malicious intent on Navre's part—he, too, was a victim of Lainie's unconscious charm ability.

On top of that, Euphie had readily admitted that Lainie wasn't the only contributor to that outcome—her own mistakes and oversights had built up over time, and then there were the kingdom's traditions and customs.

So the annulment of her betrothal was a complicated issue, which was precisely why it continued to cause problems to this day.

She wanted to resolve all that, as neatly as possible. If the parties involved were willing to go along, then I shouldn't interfere.

"All right. I'll nominate Navre as a member of our retinue, then," I offered.

"In that case, I will instruct him to join you," Commander Sprout said with a deep bow.

The gesture seemed somewhat deeper than usual—a sign, perhaps, of his paternal love.

So we were going to be touring the kingdom using the Airdra, the Airbikes, and other magical tools? Back when I was an adventurer, I had been free to fly around as I pleased, but in a way, it felt somewhat strange to be using those devices for an official royal excursion.

So I'm heading off on an official tour with Euphie…? Hold on. Isn't this actually kind of like a honeymoon?

We would be setting out on a trip together. Seeing how she had practically introduced me as her lover during her coronation, wasn't there a good chance people might see it that way?

Just thinking about the possibility of a honeymoon made the blood rush to my cheeks, and I quickly covered my face.

Wh-what should I do…? Here I am getting embarrassed all of a sudden…!

I had tried to calm myself by covering my blushing cheeks, but all that I had succeeded in doing was to draw attention to myself, leaving me to fidget in discomfort.

"…Anis? Are you listening?"

"E-eep?!"

"…What's the matter?"

"Er, ah, I—I mean…"

"…Anisphia?"

I had slipped into so much excitement that I had let the rest of

the conversation fly right over my head.

Needless to say, my mother later transformed into a wrathful demon and gave me a good talking-to for not taking the discussion seriously.

* * *

A few days after Navre was added to the retinue of our inspection tour, I paid a visit to the training grounds of the Royal Guard.

Usually, Garkie accompanied me on such outings as my bodyguard, but of course, he had his days off, too, and he used those for training.

When I had first heard about his training sessions, I had been worried that he might exhaust himself, but he had insisted that he wouldn't push himself too hard.

The reason this conversation came up was because he mentioned that he often happened to see Navre during those sessions.

In other words, the two had long been acquainted, and Garkie reported that even if Navre hadn't been the commander's son, he would still have a promising future.

However, Navre had once been regarded as a potential advisor for Allie after he took the throne, and his blunders had made him the subject of intense criticism. Things seemed to be a little easier now, owing to his many efforts since then, but his reputation still hadn't fully recovered.

Euphie, knowing of the situation, had perhaps decided to have him join us to publicly show that she had made peace with him.

It was one thing for her to want to reconcile their differences, but what about Navre? Since he was a knight, I doubted that he would refuse a direct order, but how did he really feel about it all?

When I had met with him some time ago, he seemed to have been self-reflecting. How, I wondered, did he feel about his actions? Guessing that he might be here training, I decided to stop by and take a look.

"Navre… Ah, there he is."

Taking care to stay out of sight, I spotted Navre right in the middle of a mock fight.

Was it me, or did he appear taller and more muscular since I

had last seen him?

He was holding his own against an older knight, delivering one precise blow after the other. In fact, he was pushing his opponent backward. Navre's blade carved through the air over and over, exploiting the older knight's openings as he fell back.

Finally, his opponent toppled over, staring regretfully up at the sky. Once the mock fight was over, the two contestants offered each other polite bows.

Navre, after catching his breath, started swinging away again without taking a break.

Watching on from afar, I noticed a group of other knights within hearing distance whispering to each other.

"Ah, I see… So that's how it is."

"Ah, Princess Anis is here."

"Good work, Garkie."

Finally noticing me, Garkie came running my way. Seeing who I was watching, he flashed me a grin. "Ah, did you come to check in on Navre?" he asked.

"Is everyone avoiding him?"

"You saw that…? Well, I don't want to pick a fight with anyone, so I just let it go. But he seems kind of aloof, too. Or maybe just absorbed in his training. He's not easy to talk to. But I do see him chatting with some senior knights every now and then…"

"Hmm. So there is some tension right now…"

"I suppose it would be nice if everyone could cooperate a bit better and create a warmer environment, so to speak," Garkie answered with a light shrug of his shoulders.

I continued to watch Navre practicing with his blade for a short time, before making up my mind to approach.

"Navre," I called out. "It's been a while."

"Wha—? Princess Anisphia…?!" Navre froze in place, staring back at me with wide eyes. Of course he was wondering what I was doing here.

"It's all right. Please relax. How have you been?"

"…I've been reexamining my strengths and weaknesses and reforging myself as a knight," he replied stiffly, standing up straight as he clutched his hands behind his back.

Ah, he's a serious one at heart, I thought with a chuckle.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," I began. "I came here today because I wanted to talk to you, Navre."

“To me…?”

“You should receive official instructions from Commander Sprout soon…but Euphie is planning to test out the flying magical tools I’ve developed. Essentially, it will be a test flight and a royal tour. It was decided that you would be part of the entourage.”

Navre’s eyes widened, his body stiffening. The crease between his eyebrows deepened in confusion.

“…You mean I was selected as part of Queen Euphyllia’s escort?”

“Yes.”

“Why me? With all due respect, I once did Her Majesty a great wrong…”

“And because of that, you still haven’t been fully accepted in the Royal Guard, have you? But it would be a shame to let your potential go to waste. So think of it as a reconciliation of sorts.”

“…Is that why my father went to see Her Majesty?” he murmured bitterly, wrinkling his nose.

I shook my head, and Navre’s expression turned to bewilderment.

“Euphie was the one who suggested it. Lainie will be joining us, and she also wants you to be part of the escort.”

“Lainie, too? Miss Cyan, I mean…?”

“If you all can’t settle your differences after what happened, Commander Sprout’s position will remain under a cloud of doubt, won’t it? We all want the commander to keep serving, so I think this mission is meant to help to clear up any remaining misunderstandings.”

Navre clenched his fists and stared down at the ground. He must have been experiencing a whole storm of conflicting emotions.

“…If you don’t want to go, I can tell Euphie and Lainie for you,” I offered.

“Princess Anisphia…”

“Personally, I don’t think remorse and self-reflection are the only ways to make amends. Of course, I wouldn’t try to force you to do something against your will, either.”

“But just being chosen for this group won’t necessarily convince everyone else, will it?”

“Even if Euphie nominated you herself?”

“That’s…”

“If that doesn’t convince them that you’ve all moved on, I don’t

think anything will."

Once I had pointed this out, Navre's brow furrowed even more. I was starting to worry that his expression might leave permanent wrinkles.

"You've joined the Royal Guard, Navre. You're going to have to deal with Euphie at some point, whether you like it or not. So the way I see it, it will be best for you if you work everything out here and now. I hope that you'll agree to come with us, if you're willing."

He closed his eyes, falling silent as he pondered my words.

After a few moments, he slowly opened them once more. "If I receive official instructions, I'll do my best to serve in Her Majesty's escort," he said at last.

"Thank you."

"…I would like to apologize to the two of them in person as well… I haven't had the chance yet."

With those words, his expression softened, reminding me how young he really was.

I gave him a happy nod as I returned his smile.

* * *

A few days after my conversation with Navre, he was officially informed of his assignment to join the royal tour. Before our departure, the traveling party gathered at the detached palace to meet face-to-face and practice handling the Airbikes.

Euphie, Lainie, and Ilia joined me in the reception room, while Halphys, Garkie, and Navre made up our protective escort—seven faces in total.

"Navre Sprout reporting! I'll be accompanying you on this tour as your escort! It's good to see you, Your Majesty Queen Euphyllia!" Navre said, facing Euphie with a rigid expression.

Euphie, on the other hand, responded naturally and smoothly, "Yes, it's been a long time, Master Sprout. I don't believe we've seen each other face-to-face since all that commotion."

"I caused you a lot of trouble on account of my immaturity. Please allow me to apologize again. And to you, too, Miss Cyan, for dragging you into it all," Navre said, bowing deeply.

"…Please lift your head," Euphie said quietly. Once he was

looking up again, she continued, “We were all less mature back then than we are now. We all took narrow perspectives. I also failed to realize things that I should have.”

“Your Majesty, you don’t need to apologize…”

Euphie’s gentle smile disappeared and was replaced by a more stoic expression. “If I am to lead this country as queen, I have to grow and use my past failures to help me move forward. I hope that other promising young individuals who will lead in the future will do the same. So please accept my forgiveness. I look forward to working with you on this inspection tour. I’m glad I chose you, and I’m glad to forgive you. So what do you say?”

Navre’s eyes widened, and his mouth pressed into a thin line. Slowly, he breathed out before placing his hand on his chest. “…I will do my best to live up to your high expectations, Your Majesty Queen Euphyllia.”

“Yes. And I do expect much from you, Navre,” Euphie answered, relaxing.

Next, she turned to Lainie beside her. Lainie responded to the signal with a brief nod, approaching Navre’s side.

“Lainie… Er, Miss Cyan.”

“Lainie is fine, Navre… Queen Euphyllia has already expressed everything that needs to be said. I don’t consider your actions unforgivable. If anything, I’m sorry I caused you so much trouble and hardship,” she said in apology.

“…No, it’s not your fault, Lainie. I should have been more discreet and sensible. I should have done something to rein Prince Algard in…,” Navre muttered with a pained look.

Lainie quietly shook her head in response, her smile as refreshing as a clear blue sky. “It’s already past,” she said. “No one can undo the mistakes of that day. Our only choice, I think, is to try to be as strong as we can in the days to come. I hope that you will be able to hold your head up high as a knight once again. Thank you for agreeing to this, Navre.”

“…I understand. I swear to serve loyally and bring no further shame.”

With that, his expression finally relaxed. Lainie breathed a sigh of relief as she returned to Euphie’s side.

“Then that settles the matter! What a relief, huh, Navre?”

“G-Gark…?!”

Gark’s sudden, silly remark released most of the pressure built

up around us, and I almost fell over in amused surprise.

Halphys whacked him over the back of the head, prompting him to let out a series of small cries.

Navre's frown returned. "…Your attitude is hardly appropriate, Gark."

"Huh? D-don't get mad at me… I mean, it *is* good news, isn't it…?"

"That isn't what I mean…! Try reading the room a little, would you…?!" Navre groaned, massaging his temples.

"Oh…? Sorry…," Garkie murmured in apology with a dejected look.

I couldn't take any more; I burst into audible laughter. Little by little, the atmosphere began to relax.

Garkie's and Navre's indescribable expressions only added to that newfound sense of ease.

Not bad at all for a first group meeting.

My gaze met Euphie's. She must have been thinking something along the same lines, as we grinned at each other from across the room.

CHAPTER 3

We set off on our tour of the eastern territories via Airdra and Airbike as soon as everyone knew how to operate the vehicles.

Thanks to her experience using my Witch's Broom, Euphie was quick to get the hang of it, but the others needed more time to learn the basics.

Surprisingly, Lainie was the first to master the art of piloting an Airbike, and she was soon flying freely through the sky. Even Euphie was impressed.

Next was Navre, whose experience riding horseback and wielding wind magic both came in handy. Following him was Garkie, then Ilia and Halphys, both of whom had a hard time getting used to the Airbikes.

But now that everyone was at last able to fly, we decided to finalize our full-fledged schedule and head out.

Euphie and I were taking the Airdra, while Lainie was joining up with Ilia on an Airbike. Garkie and Halphys were taking another. Navre, one of our strongest pilots, would ride alone on the third one.

"Well, we're off. And I promise to be safe."

"Anis! Remember your royal position and a modicum of shame! Don't you go and do anything wild or senseless!"

My mother had come to see us off, and I just knew she was going to grab me before we could leave. I hurried to mount my Airdra ahead of the others.

"Stop calling out after me! Come on, everyone! Let's go! Before I get another lecture!"

We couldn't afford any delays here! If my mother got her hands on me, there would be no end to her so-called lessons!

And so began our inspection tour. The Airbikes were inferior to the Airdra in power and speed, but so long as we kept to a group, we were able to travel together without any particular difficulties.

And so we made easy work of our itinerary, taking frequent breaks to stave off fatigue.

For the most part, we kept close to the ground, without gaining too much altitude, but as we didn't need to follow the roads, we

were able to shorten our travel time considerably.

“These Airbikes really are superb. If they were deployed to the various knightly orders, it could change the world,” Navre said during a break, staring solemnly at his own vehicle. “Practice is one thing, but actually using it, I can feel the tangible benefits.”

“It really cuts down on travel time, doesn’t it? Once you get used to handling these things, they’re so much easier than riding a horse. I mean, you’ve got to rest horses, and feed them and water them…,” Garkie agreed.

“In the event of an emergency, you could use one of the Airbikes to quickly inform neighboring territories that you need assistance, which would allow for the rapid deployment of reinforcements…,” Navre added.

“We’ve been flying at a low altitude thus far, but we if ascend higher into the sky, we could pass clean over any ground-based threats. Of course, we would need to be careful of any flying monsters, but I have no doubt that this Airbike alone will make a huge difference in the kingdom’s future,” Halphys observed.

Even during our break, the three couldn’t stop enthusiastically discussing the merits and future prospects of these aerial magical tools.

Watching on from the sidelines, Ilia and Lainie set about preparing tea with a Thermal Pot designed for outdoor use.

“Tea is ready, everyone. We’ve also brought a collection of small pastries. Please, enjoy,” Lainie offered.

"…Tea? Outside?" Navre looked on with bewilderment.

"Ah, nothing beats good food out in the clean, fresh air…" Garkie, on the other hand, didn't waste a moment before digging in.

Watching this pleasant scene, I couldn't help feeling like we had all gone out on a casual picnic. I felt my expression softening.

"It's so peaceful out here…," I whispered.

"It is, isn't it?" Euphie nodded along softly.

Plains and groves of trees stretched out before us as far as the eye could see.

"The eastern territories are all like this," Garkie murmured. "Not at all like the western ones."

"Right, you were born in the east, weren't you?" Navre asked.

"Sure was. It's not so bad close to the royal capital. But once you go further out, it's all countryside. Nothing but fields, forts for knights passing through, that kind of thing."

Garkie spoke matter-of-factly, but Navre and Halphys both seemed a little unsettled.

"My family home is also in the east, but it's not far from the royal capital…," Navre said.

"Ah, Count Sprout's fiefdom. The Nebels family is from the west, right?" Garkie asked.

"Yes, my family received territory from Count Antti, which is based out that way…," Halphys answered.

"People from that side of the realm always like to boast, but is it true there are many towns over there?"

"The western border runs up against our neighbors. Due to all the trade, the people there have incorporated aspects of the other cultures. That's probably why there are so many settlements."

"Right. If you want to go shopping for something a little extravagant, you're better off looking for it out west," I remarked.

"Indeed. I think there are a great many sights worth seeing." Halphys nodded with a smile.

Chatting with everyone like this, I started wondering about the unique characteristics of all the regions.

"Well, the eastern territories are sure to evolve as the region becomes more developed. I hope people start treating them better with time," I said.

For some reason, everyone turned to me after this last remark.

“Huh? What? Why are you all staring?”

“…I was just thinking, you’re incredible, Your Highness. Queen Euphyllia, too,” Garkie answered.

“What’s with that, all of a sudden? And I know Euphie’s amazing, but why me?”

“I mean, you discovered magicology. And that’s why everyone’s thinking of developing the eastern territories, right?”

“Well, if you put it that way…”

“But even if that wasn’t the case, there aren’t many people out here who haven’t heard about your work.”

“Everyone here knows about Princess Anisphia?” Navre asked.

“Back when she was out adventuring, she often went through the eastern territories. She’s a high-ranking adventurer, so all kinds of people are grateful to her for taking on the most difficult requests without a hint of hesitation,” Garkie said proudly.

“I see, so that’s it.” Navre nodded in admiration.

I couldn’t help feeling a little self-conscious, and I smiled wanly.

Perhaps noticing this change in my expression, Lainie tilted her head to one side. “Lady Anis, is something wrong?”

“No, it’s just that I don’t feel like I’ve done anything worthy of all this praise… At first, I was mainly active just around the Black Forest, like most other adventurers…”

“Yes.”

“…But I hunted a little too much, and people started asking me to do less, you know?”

“Ah…”

“They’re happy to call on me when there’s a stampede or something, but when I started spending time there on a regular basis, they told me that they had had enough already and begged me to go to the east instead! That’s why I started coming to the eastern territories…”

“That brings back memories…” Ilia sighed, reflecting on all that had happened.

Several of us knew the truth of the situation, and we remembered it less than fondly.

“So that’s how you ended up coming this way, Lady Anis…,” Garkie murmured.

“That time we got into a big fight—that was my first time coming to the east.”

“Whoa! I should have let sleeping dogs lie! Please, don’t bring that up again!” he exclaimed, covering his face with both hands as he tilted his head back.

Everyone was watching with wry smiles, except for Navre, who tapped Garkie on the shoulder curiously.

And so our break time passed to the sound of soft, peaceful laughter.

* * *

The first stop on our inspection tour was Belvetta, the largest trading hub in the eastern territories and a gorgeous city in its own right.

Belvetta was a place that many of those who lived farther east longed to one day visit. We had made it to the city without incident, but we were soon faced with one small problem.

“Huh?! You want to walk around town incognito?!”

“Think about it! You can find out so much just walking around the streets. I can’t think of a better place to learn about the everyday lives of ordinary people, see how much things cost and the like…”

“But that doesn’t mean you or Queen Euphyllia should go without an escort, Princess Anisphia…” Navre was the one voicing his reluctance, his brow furrowed in consternation.

I scratched my cheek, searching my mind for a way to bring him around. “What if you followed us from a bit of a distance? And then you could all investigate the city, too?”

“…Why are you so set on going out by yourself?”

Because I want to go on a date with Euphie, I thought. But I could easily imagine their shock if I chose to say that out loud.

Thinking back, Euphie and I had had many heart-to-heart talks, but I couldn’t recall us doing anything date-like afterward. Then again, that was to be expected, seeing as she had been kept so busy with official duties since her ascension. She hardly ever had time to go out these days.

Of course, we did chat in our bedroom and sleep by each other’s side. Still, it would be nice to go out like normal lovers every now and then. After Belvetta, there would be fewer towns where we might enjoy a gentle stroll…

But maybe I was being selfish… We were here on business. I hadn't made this suggestion just for fun.

"It will be fine, Navre. Anis does have a point."

"Your Majesty…"

"Besides, I'm also hoping to see the people as they go about their daily lives. I'm quite aware that I'm not well versed in that area, so Anis's suggestion is a good one if it will help me gain more comprehensive knowledge."

"…I understand that you might not be familiar with the common people, given your status, Your Majesty, but you would be placing yourself at unnecessary risk…" Navre remained uneasy as he voiced his disapproval.

"You're always so anxious about everything, Navre. It's fine," Garkie interjected in an easygoing tone.

"Gark…" Navre glared back at him.

Garkie, however, paid him little heed. "Even if they were attacked, they would easily be able to defend themselves. Besides, no one's asking you to abandon your duties, just to follow a little bit behind. That's a good enough compromise, if you ask me."

"This trip is also meant to be a chance for Her Majesty to relax, so I agree that it's a good idea."

"You too, Lainie…? Ah, all right then…" With both Garkie and Lainie on my side, Navre reluctantly acknowledged that he'd been outnumbered.

"In that case, we will go and acquire any remaining goods we might need for the inspection tour," Lainie announced.

"You and Ilia?" I asked.

"Yes. Any additional items shouldn't be too burdensome, I don't think. We'll go on ahead."

There's no need to say any more, is there? Ilia's gaze all but said out loud.

I responded with a soft smile. Ilia seemed to be mixing public and private, too, just as I was. And Lainie, fidgeting nervously as she tried to make up for her former restlessness, was indescribably heartwarming.

And so we each set out to explore the city of Belvetta without letting on to our true identities.

The theme of our attire this time was a young noblewoman out exploring the town in secret. Frankly, no matter how carefully we tried to dress up as commoners, Euphie's beauty would attract

attention. Inevitably, some onlookers would end up realizing our high social status.

Of course, the merchants were accustomed to such high-profile customers paying surreptitious visits, and they understood that if they exposed us for who we were, they risked being caught up in unwanted trouble.

So we decided to go for it. If we had been in the royal capital, we would probably have wanted to be a little more careful, but this was the east. My hope was that people would see the facade and then willingly play along without delving any deeper.

And so Euphie was dressed in a suitably stately outfit that Ilia had picked out for her.

She wasn't hiding her face. Few in these eastern regions would be able to recognize her, so no doubt people would just think her the daughter of a local lord out exploring the town.

For my part, I was dressed as a young maid accompanying a lady in disguise. Or my image of one anyway.

Heh-heh. Euphie was higher than me in rank now, so she wouldn't get offended if I dressed like this! Still, I pretended not to notice how uneasy she was.

“Is something the matter, milady?” I asked.

“…Something about that outfit makes me feel very uncomfortable,” Halphys said.

“Would anyone travel with such a dubious-seeming servant?” Ilia asked suspiciously.

“I’ll…refrain from saying anything.” Lainie, for her part, wouldn’t even comment.

“Really…,” I murmured.

After that brief exchange of words, we set out to explore the town. Some passersby stopped to give us a second look, but they all soon lost interest as they moved on.

After all, when someone who resembled a noble was wandering the streets, most commoners would do their best to avoid them so as not to get caught up in any trouble.

“…This doesn’t feel like the royal capital at all,” Euphie remarked.

“Well, the royal capital is in the center of the country. There might be more glamorous cities in the west, but the capital really gives you a strong sense of history.”

“Is that it? It’s so full of energy here, and I see so many people milling about.”

“Belvetta *is* the most prosperous city in the eastern territories. Plenty of folks who would have a hard time reaching the capital buy whatever they need here instead. A lot of them probably settled here to make a living, too.”

“I see. So we should be able to get the real eastern experience here.”

Euphie and I conversed as we made our way through the streets, when all of a sudden, she seemed to realize something. “Come to think of it, there are a lot of flowers here, aren’t there?”

“Belvetta is famous for its flowers. They grow all sorts here. It’s beautiful if you come in the right season; it’s like all the streets are in bloom. People grow flowers in the capital for pleasure, but it’s on another level entirely here.”

“I see…” Euphie nodded with interest.

I smiled back.

Meanwhile, I glanced back occasionally at Garkie, Navre, and Halphys, and saw the three of them embroiled in conversation as

they followed some way behind.

I don't think they're shirking their duties, but why does it feel like they're trying particularly hard not to get in our way…?

I brought my attention back to Euphie, walking alongside me. She was so close that I could have touched her if I'd reached out. This was frustrating.

Ugh…I'd be embarrassed to hold hands with those three watching, but I really *want to… But they might think I'm strange, especially as we're meant to be out here in secret. And I probably shouldn't draw any more attention to us…*

"Anis?" Euphie called out to me, peering into my eyes.

"Eep?!" I cried out, backing away as she interrupted my thoughts.

My heart was racing at this sudden interruption. *Oh, that was a surprise!*

"Is something wrong?"

"No, I just had a wicked thought… Wait a minute, I need to cool my head…"

"Wicked…? Are you up to some trick now?" Euphie asked, staring my way.

I was at a loss for a reply as she closed in on me. "No, I mean, I was just wondering something. It's nothing really."

"Anis. Speak clearly. Be open with me, please?" she said with a smile—but her eyes weren't smiling at all. "When you hesitate, it means you're holding something back."

"…That's…not true?"

"Come out with it, please."

It looked like there would be no escape. As a last resort, I tried glancing at her through my lashes, but her expression remained unfaltering.

"…Um, well."

"Yes?"

"I was…just thinking… What if we could hold hands…?"

"…Hold hands?"

"L-like lovers do! I mean…it was just a thought…"

My cheeks were burning so hot, I was almost afraid to open my mouth in case fire started escaping. I couldn't hold her gaze.

At that moment, she startled slightly, then flashed me an understanding smile. "In that case—take my hand. Anis?"

"No, um, er, look! We might end up drawing attention to

ourselves, and we're supposed to be trying to blend in here…"

"Let's deal with any issues if and when they come. My priority right now is giving you what you want," Euphie said with a pleased chuckle as she took my hand in her own.

Before I knew it, I was letting her pull me closer.

"How's this, Anis?"

"…It's nice," I replied in a near-whisper, prompting Euphie to chuckle under her breath.

"I see. This isn't so bad, is it? Very romantic. Tell me, what else would you like to do with a lover, Anis?"

"Wh-why are you asking me that?"

"You want to be with me, don't you? As lovers? I want to be with you, too, Anis. I would be so happy if you think of me that way."

"Why are you acting like you're toying with me?!" I cried back.

No, this was no good! Euphie was letting her impish side take over!

"Isn't it normal to be happy when the person you love feels that way? No, don't tell me I've left you unsatisfied all this time?"

"Unsatisfied? I mean, you're always so busy with affairs of state. Even when we're together, all we do is drink tea and sleep by each other's side…"

"…So we haven't reached a certain point yet, have we? Yes, I should have made more time for you, Anis. I suppose I forgot that you're the kind of girl who runs away when you aren't given enough attention."

"I—I'm not going to run away, though."

"Really? You do have a track record of doing that."

"That was just a bad situation! I *do* want to be with you more, Euphie! I want to be your lover! But I don't want to be selfish about it!"

"If your mother could hear you say that, I wonder whether she would be happy to see how much you've grown, or whether she would sigh at just how selfish she raised you to be… Well, which do you think?"

"Euphie! You really can be rotten sometimes!"

"Which one is it? Don't you think a concrete example is in order so that I can more clearly understand what it is you want?"

"So you're pretending not to understand what I'm saying?!"

"That's correct."

Uggghhh! Why did she have to take this kind of attitude with me?!

"Ha-ha-ha. My apologies, Anis. Do cheer up."

"You're so mean, Euphie! I hate it…!"

"I'll be nice, all right? I'm just trying to make you feel spoiled for once."

"N-nnggghhh…!"

Euphie looked genuinely happy—and I couldn't help staring back at her, blushing bright red.

Then, glancing back at me curiously, she murmured, "…I see. So you're a little worried about it?"

"…About what?"

"Public attention. I know it can't be helped, but given my position, we can't visit a place like this without an escort."

Then, gently tugging my hand, she pulled me close and whispered in my ear with a teasing voice, "It's a pity I can't have those adorable reactions of yours all for myself."

"Bah…! Wh-wh-what are you…?!"

"You're too cute, making all those faces… Such a tease."

"Y-y-*you're* the one teasing *me*! I heard you! That's cruel!"

"Maybe you're just imagining things? Come on, we have to keep going, Anis."

I had to envy Euphie for being able to chuckle the way she did. When did she become such a mischievous little imp?!

The heat that had risen to my cheeks showed no sign of subsiding, and I didn't dare lift my face. Still, with her pulling my hand, I couldn't not follow, so my only option was to push on through the city streets along with her.

* * *

We spent a pleasant day surreptitiously exploring the streets of Belvetta.

The city was famous for its wide assortment of flowers and the many dyes and inks produced from them. As such, there was a huge variety of textiles and similar products on show, with embroidery being particularly popular.

Euphie bought a mix of sewing and weaving materials that caught her eye, along with a number of embroidery items. If she

discussed eastern textiles with other members of society back at the capital, the merchants here might soon find their wares in high demand.

And Belvetta had one other specialty on display—the scene unfolding before our eyes this very moment.

“Flower baths, using a variety of local blooms!”

A private bath, just for me and Euphie, and floating atop the water was an assortment of brightly colored flowers. It was a spectacle worthy of the city’s reputation, a resplendent mix of reds and whites and pinks.

The rising steam smelled nice, too, as the fragrance of the flowers infused the very air. Euphie breathed it in, letting out a relaxed sigh.

“It smells wonderful,” she said. “It’s certainly a luxury to be able to enjoy a comfortable bath while savoring this perfect scent.”

“People come all this way for this experience, you know? Maybe not nobles, but it’s meant to be a favorite pastime of wealthy commoners,” I replied.

“Is that so? Your mother likes these flower baths, if I recall…”

“Huh? Really?”

I startled a little. Right. Come to think of it, my mother did enjoy this kind of thing.

I didn’t know much about my mother’s private life. In the first place, she had always been so busy serving as a diplomat, and even when she did return to the royal capital, I was based out of the detached palace, so our everyday lives didn’t overlap. I didn’t have a great many chances to really get to know her.

…When we got back from this tour, I would have to talk to her about flower baths and all those girly things.

“Anis. Let me wash your back,” Euphie said.

“Then I’ll have to wash yours, too,” I answered.

“Yes, please do.”

After helping each other wash our hair, too, we stepped into the flower bath.

The steam was already giving off a pleasant aroma, but after I submerged myself in the water, the scent became even more intense. The temperature was just right.

“It’s perfect…,” I said with a deep exhale.

“Yes, the water is nice, isn’t it?”

I was immersed up to my neck, but Euphie was sitting with her

torso above the water.

She tended to prefer slightly cooler baths, so it would no doubt take her a moment to get used to the heat. A short time later, she allowed herself to relax, sinking down to her shoulders by my side.

"Ah…"

"Hee-hee. What does that mean?"

"I'm exhausted…"

"You really do like baths, don't you, Anis?"

"I do. I'd like to take one enhanced with a magical invention, too. Ah! That might actually help attract more customers to the baths here!"

"That's not a bad idea."

We were both enjoying our conversation from the comfort of the water. All of a sudden, I noticed a flower floating my way from the center of the bath, and I took it in my hands.

Holding it close for a moment, I passed it to Euphie.

"What is it?" she asked, examining it.

"The color. It's just like your eyes," I said with a laugh.

Her rosy-colored irises were the exact same shade as this blossom.

She stared back wide-eyed, her gaze focused on the flower in my hands. Finally, she relaxed, her smile softening as she accepted the proffered blossom.

"So this is how you see the color of my eyes?" she asked.

"Yep. It's beautiful."

"Beautiful, huh?" she repeated, drawing closer with a gentle smile.

My gaze met her eyes—and I couldn't look away.

The next moment, she grabbed my hand and pulled me closer, reaching for my waist. We were practically pressing up against each other, our breaths intermingling before our faces.

"E-Euphie, wh-wh-what are you…?!"

"Well? Are you going to answer me?"

"What?!"

"You think my eyes are beautiful?" she asked, tilting her head slightly to one side.

She was wearing her hair tied up so that it wouldn't get wet in the bath, clearly revealing the back of her neck. Her cheeks were slightly red—probably from the heated water.

She continued to stare my way, her eyes glistening, and now it

was even harder for me to look away. My heart was beating so fast that it felt like it might jump right out of my chest, and my face was heating up in a way that had nothing to do with the warm water.

"Anis?"

"…Y-you're being mean again…!"

"Aren't you the one being mean, by refusing to answer me?"

She slipped closer—and before I could say anything, she pressed her lips to mine.

They felt hotter than usual, probably on account of the bath. She took advantage of my surprise to try to deepen the kiss, so I gave a counterattack with a light nip.

"Here?! In the bath?!" I said.

"…Yes," she answered, sticking her tongue out playfully.

How I hated that mischievous look of hers! I should have bitten down even harder!

I may have halted her kiss, but her next move was to wrap her arms around me in a hug. She wasn't about to let go, and the press of her breasts was reigniting the warm afterglow of her kiss.

"…You're too close!"

"Do you think so?"

"Yes! And your hands, too! And your legs are getting tangled in mine!"

And so we kept flirting and messing around, until Euphie finally started getting light-headed from the heat.

I hurried to help her out, but she was already exhausted, unable to get up.

"…Anis? I don't feel well."

"Serves you right!"

"…Yes…"

…Well, I didn't want to her to be ill in the middle of our tour, so I did nurse her back to health. Hopefully she would learn a valuable lesson from all this!

Chapter 4 Roaring to the Heavens

The inspection tour continued without a hitch as we moved from one agreeable item on our itinerary to the next, taking ample breaks in between.

Even if the eastern towns we visited were all rather small compared to the royal capital, they were large enough to be called cities. Their streets were full of people, and their markets were bustling with activity.

As we moved farther eastward, though, such scenes became increasingly rare in favor of plains, small forests, and fields of every size imaginable. It was just as Garkie had told us.

It was around this time that we visited the territory ruled by Viscount Persimmon.

The Persimmon family's fief was located even farther east than most of the other eastern territories. They were essentially neighbors to Garkie's family, the Lampes.

Of all the fiefdoms that we had seen so far, theirs left by far the strongest impression.

The fields didn't look particularly productive, and there were very few people out working. Those individuals whom we did see were either children or elderly, with very few youths to be found. A great many of the houses and buildings seemed to be damaged and in need of repair, and even the lord's mansion had a rather desolate appearance, as though it required greater upkeep than the occupants could afford.

"…I had heard rumors, but I didn't realize it was this bad," Garkie murmured after we had looked over the area.

The others likewise seemed at a loss for words.

The reason that the Persimmon territory was on our itinerary was that it had suffered considerably from monster attacks. Viscount Persimmon had described it as a stampede, given the scale of the damage, and he had immediately requested support and financial assistance from neighboring regions.

The destruction wasn't as severe as when the dragon had struck, and thanks to the viscount's quick judgment and the support of his neighbors, the monsters had been brought under control

without further incident.

The damage, however, was still immense. Viscount Persimmon's own knight corps, along with other knightly groups that had been dispatched to the scene, had suffered numerous causalities, and the family had been saddled with crushing debts as they tried to compensate the bereaved families.

On top of that, natural disasters had hit the crops hard, further pushing the family into debt in an attempt to feed those who lived under their lordship.

Euphie had insisted on seeing the devastation with her own eyes, and so a visit to Persimmon territory had been added to our schedule.

I glanced around, trying to catch a glimpse of her reaction, but she was simply staring at our surroundings with her lips pressed in a line. From the looks of it, she was thinking deeply about all this.

At that moment, a man—Viscount Persimmon himself, if I had to guess—stepped out from the lord's mansion, followed by a group of retainers.

His face was gaunt, and there could be no hiding the dark circles beneath his eyes. Unable to conceal his fatigue, he offered us a deep and respectful bow.

"Welcome, Queen Euphyllia, Princess Anisphia. I'm sorry I can't offer you a more suitable reception…"

"Greetings, Viscount Persimmon. Please, raise your head. I've heard of the state of your fief. You needn't worry about hospitality."

"I'm humbled by your understanding. This is my daughter, Charnée."

As the viscount motioned toward her, the simply dressed girl by his side offered a polite bow before looking up at us.

Her hair was a pale red that shone gold, and her eyes were like amethysts. She seemed so young that it was hard to believe she was really an adult.

She was clearly nervous. But all the same, she addressed us with a proper greeting. "I'm Charnée Persimmon. It's an honor to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too, Charnée," I answered with a smile, hoping not to get her too worked up.

Her eyes widened slightly, and she finally relaxed enough to flash me a smile befitting her age.

* * *

After being shown to the guest room by Charnée, we were invited to share dinner with the Persimmons—which was also a chance for us to talk.

The Persimmons were a family of four—the viscount himself; his wife, the viscountess; Charnée; and her younger brother.

The younger brother was just barely old enough to be able to walk, greeting us nervously while holding his mother's hand. Perhaps concerned about the young boy, the viscountess left with him shortly after dinner.

"I must apologize for the plain fare…," Viscount Persimmon said, clearly worried about the quality of the meal.

"It's no problem. It was delicious. You have an excellent cook," Euphie answered.

Indeed, the food was delightful. The cook had clearly done the very best possible with the limited ingredients on hand.

Even Euphie, who had largely lost interest in food since becoming a spirit covenantor, had relished the meal.

Her comments may have been in part to soothe the viscount's mind, but the way she tried each dish in turn showed that she meant every word.

Seeing this response, Viscount Persimmon stroked his chest in relief. Charnée, too, breathed a sigh.

"Viscount Persimmon," Euphie said with a deep breath. "Could you tell me the situation here in your territory?"

The viscount's apprehension made a visible return as he answered with tragic determination. "To be frank, it isn't good. In addition to the stampede, we've been hit by one natural disaster after another, and our stockpiles are running out…"

"I see… Is there any chance that your revenue might recover next year?"

"Even if we can make it through this year, there's no telling what the next one will bring. A lot of our young people have left to find work elsewhere. Whether or not they choose to return will make all the difference."

"So are you considering giving up your titles, Viscount Persimmon?" Euphie asked.

I startled at this rapid turn of the conversation and glanced

across at her.

But I couldn't blame her for that doubt.

Young people were valuable workers, and when they had children of their own, that led to an increase in a territory's population. Which was precisely why it was such a problem when all the young people moved elsewhere. It was no wonder that a fiefdom with a dwindling population was falling into disrepair.

This wasn't Viscount Persimmon's fault—just a series of uncontrollable misfortunes. It was truly regrettable.

The viscount wasn't one to give in to self-deception, and so faced with the prospect of being unable to rebuild his territory by himself, he was apparently considering relinquishing control back to the crown.

That would be an incredibly difficult decision to make, and the fact that he was considering it at all spoke to his extraordinary character.

Thinking what a shame it would be for the viscount to have to give up his lands, I looked to Euphie, who responded with a knowing nod.

"Viscount Persimmon," she began. "I can only imagine how dear this estate is to you, and how grueling these circumstances must be. I understand why you are considering giving up your titles and lands. But I beg you not to do so."

"Your Majesty…"

"No doubt you've already heard about my journey to the throne, but it is my goal to breathe new life into the realm, in the form of magicology and magical tools, as advocated by Princess Anisphia. Once this technology becomes widespread, it has the potential to transform the lives of the common people."

"That's… I've heard about your ideas."

"But there's a problem that we must overcome first, before we can make this a reality. And I believe the key to solving it lies here in the east."

"It does…? Here…?" the viscount murmured doubtfully.

"That key lies in untapped deposits of spirit resources," Euphie continued. "Conditions here in the east are similar to those of the Black Forest in the north, which is our largest mining area. Your territory, Viscount Persimmon, is a prime candidate."

"Oh… U-uh…I see…? In other words…?" The viscount struggled to follow her at first, but he soon put the pieces together,

staring back at Euphie with surprise.

Euphie, seeing this reaction, gave him a nod and a warm smile. “From here on out, the development of the east will be one of the realm’s most pressing tasks. And I am seeking out as many capable subjects as I can find. Viscount Persimmon—I hope you will give me your loyalty and support.”

“…B-but it won’t be easy rebuilding my holdings the way they are now…”

“You said you were worried about getting through the year, and that you don’t know what the next one will bring. In that case, how about I guarantee that you will be able to survive the first, and give you the opportunity to prosper in the next,” Euphie declared.

Viscount Persimmon stared back at her, tears welling up in his eyes. Charnée, sitting beside him, was holding her hands to her mouth.

“I will help you to develop your territory so that it can serve as a resource mining area. Will you offer me your loyalty? Will you pledge to support the realm into the future?”

“…Yes! I give you my word. I swear it on my family’s name. I will be true to the Kingdom of Palettia—and to you, Queen Euphyllia,” the viscount said, rising to his feet and offering her a heartfelt bow.

A moment later, Charnée followed suit, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“In that case,” Euphie said with a smile, “let’s talk a little more about the future of your holdings.”

* * *

After the discussion with Viscount Persimmon, it was time for us all to go our separate ways.

The night was getting late, and Euphie and I were lying side by side on the bed in the guest room with the lights dimmed. The topic of conversation was, of course, our host.

“I think Viscount Persimmon will be a great asset in the future,” I said.

“He’s honest and reliable, and while he can be a little overcautious, he seems trustworthy to me,” Euphie answered.

“I hope he can rebuild his holdings…”

“There are a number of potential relief plans we could offer him, so I’m hoping to hear more about the local conditions to decide which would be best.”

“Knowing you, I’m sure you’ll pick the right one. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“I’ll do my best not to betray that trust… But we’re only here today thanks to your efforts, Anis.”

“Me?” I repeated, turning my body toward her.

“Yes,” Euphie answered, mirroring me. “If not for you, none of this would have been possible. Take the Airbikes, for instance. If we provide the viscount with one, he’ll be able to call for help if monsters should attack his territory again.”

“I did have that in mind when I designed them.”

“And in addition to the Airbikes, the other magical tools you’ve developed are filled with possibility. There are so many places where people might use them. That’s why they’re so highly sought after. I *know* they’re going to be popular, and that’s why I made that proposal to Viscount Persimmon.”

“…Don’t. It’s embarrassing to hear.” I found myself fidgeting.

At that moment, Euphie reached out to touch my cheek.

“You’re still not used to praise?” she asked.

“…I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it. I’ve always been this way. I can’t change just like that.”

“Well, you’d better, for my sake.”

“Hmm. I’ll do my best.”

“Oh? Your mother told me that’s what you always say when you don’t want to do something.”

“Ngh, why does everyone always bring that up?! Mother is always too strict with me!” I protested.

Euphie chuckled at this display of anger. “She’s worried about you, Anis.”

“I know… But she’s still too strict…”

“From where I stand, it seems that she’s loosened up considerably.”

“Huh…? You’re lying… Every time she sees me, she breaks into a frown…”

“Maybe you’re special to her?”

“I don’t want to be special if it means I get lectured all the time…”

“In that case, maybe I should say something to her. Maybe if I

tell her you'll start to hate her if she doesn't go a little easier on you, she'll soften her attitude a little?"

"…I'm not going to hate her…"

I was fully aware that her strictness toward me was a sign of her maternal love. Besides, I couldn't even imagine how she might react if someone said I hated her. If they said that to Father, I could easily imagine a physical altercation.

"Whatever you want her to hear, I think it would be better coming directly from you, Anis."

"…If she would stop scolding me for one second, I'd talk to her as much as she wants."

"I'm sure she would be happy if you did speak to her. She might end up scolding you if you let her take the lead, but if you directed the conversation…"

"…I wouldn't know what to talk about."

Only with that admission did I realize that I had never really taken the initiative in speaking to her.

In that regard, it was only natural that my mother found it difficult to talk to me. Maybe that was why she focused so much on my behavior?

That might have been good enough up till now, but I wanted to find some way to improve our relationship. I didn't want to be constantly upsetting her, either.

"Your mother is from the east, isn't she? Once we go back, why don't you talk about what you've seen here? It might serve as a good conversation starter."

"…Right. I do want to hear how she met my father. Yes, I'll try asking her."

"I'm sure that will make her very happy, too." Euphie seemed to be smiling as she said this, making me feel vaguely uncomfortable.

But there was something strange about that smile. "Huh?" I looked hard at her face, prompting her to wrinkle her brow.

"…I don't know what to do when you stare like that," she said.

"Why?"

"…I've been growing, too, you know? So I'm trying not to be so greedy."

"Ah. You're hungry? You need more magical energy?"

"I've had quite enough, so there's no problem there. It's just…"

"…Just what…?"

Euphie closed her mouth, mumbling under her breath. I stared back at her, waiting for her to speak, but all she did was avert her gaze.

"Euphie?"

"…Would you be angry if I touched you for no reason?"

"Huh?"

"…"

"Um, Euphie?"

"That's it, I can't take it anymore."

I blinked while Euphie turned her back on me, pouting.

Huh? That reaction was cute. I could feel my lips curling in a grin. "You're so adorable, Euphie."

"…Don't mock me."

"You were very assertive back in Belvetta."

"…I let myself get carried away. I wish I hadn't."

"Do you…?"

Her response this time only added to her charm. I couldn't keep my amusement to myself. Nope, I wanted to take her in my arms and laugh out loud.

But I didn't know what she would do to me if I did. I tried my best to contain my laughter as I reached for her cheek.

"Isn't wanting to touch me a good enough reason?"

"…If that was the case, I wouldn't be able to stop."

"I suppose not."

My fingers brushed against her skin.

"But I'm not going to stop when *I* feel like touching *you*."

"…You're no fair, Anis."

"Oh?"

"You make me happy too easily. But if you make me *too* happy…"

"It's too easy, huh…?"

Maybe the reason I was feeling a little down lately was because Euphie kept spoiling me all the time.

We were in the middle of our inspection tour, and I could see that she was working to keep up appearances as queen—but now that we were alone, she could hardly control herself.

And that was precisely what was so cute about her. I couldn't help loving and adoring her.

"You can touch me whenever you want, with or without a reason, Euphie."

"…Even when it makes you embarrassed?"

"…I suppose you should show a *little* restraint." I had to add at least one condition; the light in her eyes had suddenly turned dangerous.

The next moment, she drew close and pulled me into a hug, shrinking slightly as she buried her face in my neck.

"I love it when you pamper me like this, Anis, but you have to tell me when it's too much. I don't think I can hold back when it comes to you…"

"And I love it when you act this way. So I'll do my best not to cross any lines I shouldn't."

Even if it did leave me feeling embarrassed and occasionally overwhelmed.

But I did want to indulge Euphie, with all my heart. When I doted on her like this, she would act so clumsy and yet so earnest, which made me love her all the more.

When I patted her on the back to comfort her, she pulled away from my neck and brought her lips up to my face. As her skin slid over mine, I was overcome with a tingly sensation, and I fidgeted slightly atop the bed.

"…You're too vulnerable," she said.

"Only in front of you."

"…And so sweet. You should be more alert, Anis."

"I don't *mean* to be obtuse. It's only because you keep putting me in uncomfortable situations. Still, I don't think I mind all that much."

"…And then you say things like that," she huffed as she gave me a series of play bites.

Had she learned this recently, or had she come by it naturally? Whatever the case, she was doing it a lot lately.

My smile deepened as I listened to Euphie's adorable protests.

* * *

"Ah, the weather's great! It's a beautiful day for an outing!" I exclaimed, stretching both arms over my head.

"An outing? What's that supposed to mean?" Garkie retorted with a sharp glance.

A few days into our visit to Viscount Persimmon's holdings, we

found ourselves trekking through a forest, a favored hunting ground for the local residents.

Our objective was simple—to examine the site of the monster stampede and to consider the area's potential for resource mining.

Something must have caused the stampede, but whatever it was, it had remained uninvestigated owing to a lack of manpower.

The viscount wouldn't have allowed us to investigate the stampede for fear of our safety, so we had prepared a more acceptable pretext to win his consent—a preliminary survey to examine the variety of spirit resources present.

Leading the party were Euphie and myself, with Garkie and Navre serving as protection and Charnée as our guide.

Lainie, Ilia, and Halphys had offered to help with work at Viscount Persimmon's mansion. Their job, they told us, was to see to our care and comfort, and they saw assisting in the mansion as part of that responsibility.

No doubt they wanted to lend the viscount a helping hand after all the hardships had piled up on his shoulders, and the offer of support had apparently left Persimmon humbled.

"Thank goodness for the nice weather today. It makes it easy to find your way around," Charnée said with a laugh, looking more like an adventurer than a nobleman's daughter. She carried a staff in her hands, had a dagger sheathed at her waist, and wore a bow and arrows slung over her back.

She seemed perfectly at home marching through the forest.

"You seem to know your way around, Miss Charnée," Navre said, impressed.

"Yes, I've been visiting the forest ever since I was a child," she answered.

"Doesn't your father object to your coming here?"

"I like hunting. Besides, regular patrols of the forest are important for managing the estate, and I have to stand in for my father sometimes. I'm good with a bow, too."

"I see. My father also used to take me hunting," Garkie called out cheerfully.

Charnée seemed reassured by his presence as well.

They were both from the east, so maybe that was why they had such good rapport. Navre was, too, but he was more familiar with life in the royal capital. This conversation was apparently fascinating to him.

I couldn't help smiling as I watched the three of them getting along. When I turned my attention back to the forest, Euphie approached my side.

"Let's go a little deeper in and see what we find," she suggested.

"Yes. I suppose we should."

We passed beneath the trees awhile longer as we headed farther into the forest. On the way, Charnée shot down a few wild birds with her bow, leaving Garkie and Navre to prepare them for eating later.

It wasn't a lot of food when you took into account everyone who lived in the viscount's territory, but it would still help. And of course, Charnée was eager to offer us all fresh, delicious meat.

While she, Garkie, and Navre were enjoying themselves hunting, I was busy looking for traces of monsters and spirit materials on the ground and around nearby trees.

"…What do you think, Anis?" Euphie asked.

"All the traces I can find here suggest a wild flurry of activity. But the forest seems too quiet for that to be the case. It's a little unsettling…"

"How so…?"

I had spotted claw marks on trees, broken branches, and footprints that all spoke to the intensity of the stampede.

But the forest now was eerily quiet. There was nothing to suggest that the trees had been heavily damaged, and nothing about our surroundings looked out of the ordinary.

So considering how many signs pointed to an abundance of remaining monsters, it was hard not to feel a touch of trepidation.

"Forests are usually fairly quiet after a stampede, but this one feels *too* quiet."

"Too quiet?" Euphie repeated.

"First of all, there are too few monsters here, from what we've seen. Stampedes are usually caused by monster herds that have lost out in a battle for territory, or by huge creatures driving smaller ones away," I said, raising two fingers into the air as I laid out my argument. "If one herd of monsters had lost territory to another, the total number of creatures occupying the area shouldn't change all that much."

"You're saying that one group would have simply given way to another?"

"Yes. If a larger monster had driven smaller ones out, that

might explain the decrease in numbers. And when there's less prey to hunt, the possibility of larger creatures attacking human settlements rises, too."

"That almost sounds like the dragon incident…," Euphie murmured uneasily.

I pressed my lips together. "Dragons are extreme examples, although the principle is largely the same. But back to the forest here—I don't feel like its assortment of animal and plant life has been destroyed."

"So the forest's resources remain…"

"We've seen hardly any carcasses, so it doesn't seem like a territorial dispute. But looking at all these leftover signs, there's no doubt that a stampede took place here."

"So you think it was caused by a large monster?"

"The monster population seems to have dropped too much for that. If a large monster had driven smaller ones away, where did they all go? We would have expected to hear more reports of sightings. No, there aren't enough living monsters here, and there aren't enough dead ones, either."

That was why I was so stuck on this.

A larger monster had appeared, driving smaller creatures into a stampede. So far, so good. The problem was what had happened after that.

The monster population in the forest had fallen too much. From the clues littered around us, they should have been here in considerable number.

"The only possibility I can think of is that most of the monsters here left the forest to escape a much larger one."

"…If you're right, what kind of monster would we be talking about?"

"It would have to be a big eater with a huge hunting range. So wide that the others would have to abandon the forest to reach safety."

"So you're saying there aren't any other monsters left here? That can't be good. That's a huge scale…"

"We'll have to investigate properly to be sure. We need to trace all this back to its source."

"Do you think it's still lurking somewhere in here?"

"Maybe. It could just be luck that Charnée and the others haven't found it yet."

“Mightn’t it have left for somewhere else?”

“That’s possible. But if it had, we might expect reports of other stampedes elsewhere. Maybe it’s had its fill, and it’s picked somewhere to rest…?”

At this point, it was safe to assume that we weren’t dealing with a territorial dispute between two monster herds, but rather the appearance of a huge creature forcing all others to flee en masse.

The monsters had deemed the entire forest to be unsafe, and as a result, Viscount Persimmon’s estate had suffered considerable damage.

So if my conclusions were correct, the creature, whatever it was, still lurked within the forest.

“Hmm… Is it happening again?” I wondered aloud.

“Is what happening again?”

“There was a similar stampede once before…”

“You don’t mean—”

“Wait.”

Just as I was about to tell Euphie what I knew, a distant sound caught my attention.

“…It’s coming.”

“Huh?”

Just then, a loud howl resounded through the forest, so sharp and vicious that Charnée ended up letting out a small shriek.

“Wh-what was that?! It sounded like a monster!”

“A monster?!”

“Garkie, Navre! Protect Charnée!”

“Princess Anisphia?!”

I pulled the Celestial from its holder at my waist and took a step toward the source of the sound.

At the same time, the forest was astir. *Something* was rushing toward us at frightening speed.

The next moment, a huge wolf appeared, snapping the branches of trees in its path. It had to be three to four times larger than an adult human.

The creature’s fur was dark gray, its crimson eyes gleaming as it fixed us in a glare, drool dropping all over the place from its open mouth.

“I-it can’t be…?!” Navre stammered.

“No… A Fenrir…?!” Charnée added, her voice trembling with confusion and fear as she fell flat on her backside.

Fenrir was a general term given for wolfish monsters that had grown to immense proportions with the help of magicite crystals.

Usually, creatures imbued with magicite crystals were given their own names. This was to distinguish them from regular monsters, as they were so much more dangerous and powerful.

This rule, however, didn't apply to wolf monsters. Wolves that had been transformed through magicite tended to have wide hunting ranges, and thanks to their high speed and agility, it was often difficult to gather enough information on particular specimens to give them all unique designations.

Nonetheless, society couldn't afford to ignore them. And so, to emphasize the threat that they posed, people had come to refer to such magicite-imbued wolf monsters as Fenrirs.

If one of them had managed to get its own unique name, that could only mean that people had gathered enough information to properly identify it—in other words, that earlier attempts to defeat it had failed.

Even the best adventurers would have a hard time with such a creature. In fact, looking back on the history of the Kingdom of Palettia, the very first Fenrir was infamous for the tremendous damage that it had wrought. That was why the term *Fenrir* inspired fear wherever it was heard.

"Wow, a Fenrir. That's a rarity," I murmured.

"I see. So this is a Fenrir…," Euphie whispered.

"Uh? You've heard about them?"

"Yes. Only from old documents, though."

"If we're dealing with a Fenrir, that explains the hunting range and the fleeing monster."

"P-Princess Anisphia!" Navre called out from behind in panic. "Why are you acting so calm?!"

Just as I had suspected, it would be too dangerous to leave this to Garkie and Navre.

Besides, the creature was focusing on me and Euphie—first sizing us up, then baring its fangs in mirth.

"Does this mean it regards us as prey?" I wondered aloud.

"I'm a spirit covenantor, and you have your dragon magic, Anis. Maybe it can sense those?"

"It must have a good nose, then. Well, you could think of it as a blessing in disguise—we've stumbled on this Fenrir and its rare magicite!"

"…Ah, so I was right." Navre sighed.

"You two! Are you even listening to us?!" Garkie cried out.

"It's all right! We can hear you loud and clear! Like I said, protect Charnée! This Fenrir is *mine*!"

I hadn't felt this elated in so long. I could feel the grin spreading across my face and the tingling in my body with the dragon magic flowing from my Impressed Seal.

In fact, this wasn't my first time meeting a Fenrir.

Last time, however, we had taken the monster down as a group, so I had received a relatively small share. Maybe this time I could snatch the whole thing for myself!

No, I couldn't wipe the grin from my face. Partly because I couldn't let an enormous magicite monster out of my sight, but I was also curious to know what kind of magicite it possessed!

"Euphie. Are you ready?"

"Yes, let's face it together. We can't afford to let this Fenrir escape."

"Then you attack it from behind!"

"All right. You focus on attacking from in front."

The Fenrir bristled, ready for the fight, and opened its jaw wide. It let out a roar so powerful that it almost ruptured my eardrums.

The wind of it washed over me, and my smile deepened as I stepped forward to avoid being blown away. The force of that howl was enough to snap the trees around us and clear an opening in the forest.

"You're a very bad doggy!" I called out.

As the wind slowed, I took a firm step forward—and flew straight for it.

The Fenrir responded to my heightened speed, leaping at me with its jaw open wide.

Without slowing my momentum, I collided hard against the creature's fangs, using the Celestial as a shield, then used that motion to spin around and slip behind it.

As soon as the Fenrir landed on the ground, I poured my magical energy into the Celestial.

"The first step is simple—slash!"

I converted my magical energy into a keen blade, swiping at the massive beast.

But the Fenrir recognized that the blade was suddenly

extending and leapt back to avoid it, tilting its head to one side. I wasn't even able to graze its teeth.

“Ngh! I was hoping to at least defang you there!”

This Fenrir had a quick reaction time, and that alone put it out of the ordinary. On top of that, it was bigger and faster than I was.

Then, as though to return the favor, it kicked off from the ground and sprang toward me.

“Roooaaarrr!”

“What?! Sit! Shake! Lie down!”

This time, I sidestepped a swipe of its claws, then jumped up and delivered a hard heel drop.

Its fur, however, was harder than I had expected, and my body suddenly reacted to a sense of impending danger. The leg that had delivered that kick twisted me out of the way, and I jumped to safety.

“Grrr!” The Fenrir snarled as I hit the ground.

That same moment, a cannonball of wind came flying straight for me.

I quickly deflected it with the Celestial, but the impact sent me flying backward. After landing safely on my feet, I adopted a fresh battle pose.

“This damn dog is almost dangerous!”

The Fenrir’s reaction speed meant that I couldn’t sit on my laurels. I could respond to its attacks, but if it tried to escape, I might be in trouble. I couldn’t afford to let it go.

“Anis, fall back! Run!” I heard Euphie cry.

Without waiting a second more, I flew back as fast as I could and readied to retreat.

“Earthquake!”

Euphie gripped the Arc-en-Ciel and thrust it into the ground with tremendous force.

In an instant, the earth exploded, rising up and blowing away the trees that the Fenrir had uprooted a moment earlier.

A spear of dirt rose up from the protruding earth, aimed right for the Fenrir, but the creature dodged it and pounced for Euphie.

She had noticed the attack, too, quickly extending her earthen spear to block the monster’s path.

“Air Hammer!” she cried, slamming the wind-based bludgeon through the mound of earth.

The strike lost its momentum as it hit the earthen spear, but it

sent a rain of dirt and rocks pelting down on the Fenrir.

The creature twisted uncomfortably amid the downpour—and in the meantime, Euphie leaped up and swung the Arc-en-Ciel through the air.

"Waterfall!"

A torrent of water poured from above, crashing down on the Fenrir and reducing the crumbled ground into a sea of mud.

In retaliation, the Fenrir opened its mouth wide, shooting more blasts of wind Euphie's way.

As the wind whipped up under her feet, Euphie ran through the air above to avoid the attacks. When the onslaught was over, she rushed even faster toward the frenzied Fenrir.

"Icicle Storm! Hear me and rage upon this mad wolf!"

A vortex of wind and ice kicked up around her, enveloping the Fenrir. That whirlpool of cold air quickly chilled the water and mud in the air and froze it all to the Fenrir's body.

The creature let out a tortured howl as it tried to flee the frigid vortex.

"If only I knew where it was going!"

"…?!"

I spun around—and changed my magic blade into a three-pronged claw, tearing through the Fenrir's flesh as it twisted to evade the other strike.

Blood splattered across the ground, and the creature let out a high-pitched scream as my weapon tore through it. Yes! I had landed a good, hard blow! But Euphie was being as reckless as ever—she had completely wrecked this part of the forest!

"Lady Anis!" she shouted.

I turned back to the Fenrir—and saw it was bounding straight for me as it roared.

That howl was so deafening that my ears were ringing afterward, and my surroundings darkened. I glanced overhead—and found clouds blocking the sky… Clouds? How had they appeared so suddenly?

"Uh-oh…! Euphie, get down!" I cried out, sensing danger.

Neither of us wasted a second before falling back from the Fenrir.

The next moment, something rained down from the sky toward the creature's body—a light so bright that it seemed to burn the eyes just looking at it, accompanied by another earsplitting crash.

Thunder!

"So it can control wind *and* lightning?!"

In terms of magic, lightning was considered a subcategory of wind. If this monster could summon thunderclouds, its magicite had to have that attribute, too.

The Fenrir was still in good shape despite being struck by the bolt of lightning. In fact, it seemed to be storing the electricity in its body. That must have been why it had summoned the thunderclouds, and now that it was electrified, its body was emitting a sharp crackling sound.

Once again, the creature bared its fangs. There could be no mistaking that its power and speed had increased compared to a moment ago; now we could just barely keep up.

"Channeling lightning?! What a cheater!"

I used the Celestial to parry its oncoming fangs—but the next moment, a dull numbness ran through my body.

Did this monster just shock me on contact?!

I fought to dispel that electricity by pushing back with my magical energy, but it turned into a jostling match. The pins and needles were spreading across my body, so I didn't like my chances.

"I'm not…your plaything!"

Without waiting any longer, I poured all my magical power into the Celestial. The blade grew longer and longer in response to my will and lifted my body into the air.

Once I was high up, I let go of the magical blade and began to fall. The Fenrir was waiting immediately below, fangs at the ready. But I wasn't about to let it have me!

"Euphie! Get him!" I called out.

"…! Air Hammer!" Euphie needed no time to realize what my plan was and lashed out with a wind-powered hammer.

Using the Celestial to shield myself from the buffeting winds, I landed a short distance away. Well, I did grimace a little in pain on hitting the ground as I hadn't been able to fully absorb the impact, but it was better than having my whole body go numb from that electricity!

"Anis! Are you all right?!" Euphie rushed to my side as soon as I landed.

"Euphie! Did you see that?!" I cried back.

"Yes! It has wind and thunder attributes!"

"And it's a Fenrir! Just how much will that magicite be worth,

you think?!" I blurted out.

I watched as her shoulders slumped. Well, we were still in the middle of a fight, so it wasn't an overly visible show of emotion.

"I knew that was what you were after! You're incorrigible, you know that?!"

"Sorry! But I *need* to get my hands on it!"

I would take that Fenrir's magicite no matter what! How could dual attributes not be worth researching?!

"Euphie! I want to settle this quickly, so I'm going to use my *heart*!" I declared, adjusting my stance with the Celestial and focusing my mind.

"Awake! Aerial System: Dragon Heart!"

I tapped directly into the dragon magic imprinted on my back, letting it flow through my body into the Celestial.

That power triggered a change in the magical blade, which rapidly began to crystallize through the dragon magic.

I stepped forward, and at the same moment, the Fenrir let out a terrible roar, lashing out at me with a lightning-infused claw that would tear me apart.

I swung the Celestial straight for the creature, blade and claw crossed, and red droplets danced through the air.

The tip of the Fenrir's paw fell to the ground, along with a gout of blood. The monster let out a frightened scream and started kicking wildly.

The aggressive drive to fight in its eyes gave way to a hint of fear—but it unleashed a powerful roar, as though rousing itself to keep on facing me.

"I salute you for standing your ground!"

The creature's jaw opened wide. Undaunted, I unleashed the Celestial's crystallized magic blade in a blinding flash.

That strike halted the Fenrir's progress and even knocked it back a little. The creature flew past swathes of fallen trees before finally hitting one that was still standing.

The wolf staggered to its feet once more, but it soon collapsed, shivering. The ground shook slightly from the impact, then silence fell over our surroundings.

After I was sure that it had finally stopped moving, I let out a

slow exhale.

Releasing my dragon magic, I turned my gaze to the Celestial. I couldn't help grinning at my ever-dependable partner, which still showed no sign of buckling even under the stresses of so much power.

Thank you, Tomas. You outdid yourself this time.

Sheathing the weapon, I turned back to Euphie. She appeared to have relaxed her guard, returning the Arc-en-Ciel to its own sheath with a sigh.

"Good work, Euphie," I said.

"Yes. You too, Anis," she replied as we exchanged smiles.

"Garkie? How are you and the others?"

I turned to the three others waiting some distance behind us. Navre and Charnée were watching on in disbelief.

Garkie wore a strange expression, too, taking a moment to make up his mind before speaking his thoughts: "I know I'm probably not supposed to ask this, but do you two really need an escort?"

"You're right! You shouldn't ask that, Garkie!"

He probably couldn't help himself, but still my voice echoed throughout the forest as I responded with a sharp rebuke.

* * *

After confirming that the Fenrir was dead, we removed its claws as proof of its defeat and headed back to the mansion.

Upon our return, Viscount Persimmon was so surprised that he almost collapsed on the spot.

It was little wonder. If any of his people had encountered the creature before our visit, it would have wrought unfathomable damage. We were simply fortunate that that hadn't been the case.

"About the Fenrir—I'd like to ask the Adventurers Guild to butcher it and bring the parts back to the capital, Viscount," I said. "We're still in the middle of our inspection tour, so if you help us arrange transportation for the materials, we'll give you a good selection of those materials so you can start rebuilding your estate."

"Y-you will?"

"Ah! Of course, I'll be keeping the parts that I need for researching my magical tools, though!"

“Th-that’s fine… But you would grant me a selection of the materials…?”

“They will prove vital for you to rebuild your estate, Viscount Persimmon,” Euphie added. “Please accept them as a part of the realm’s support.”

“If you insist, Your Majesty…,” the viscount said with a bow of his head. “Although I can’t help but wonder how much destruction the Fenrir might have caused if you and Princess Anisphia hadn’t been here. I can’t thank you enough…!”

“No, no, not at all! It’s a blessing in disguise!” I responded. “We should all be grateful it didn’t hurt anyone else! And now that it’s gone, other monsters will gradually return to the forest, which should help boost your incomes. We can probably leave the restoration of your holdings to you now, Viscount.”

Viscount Persimmon’s eyes widened slightly, before he relaxed his shoulders and let out a deep sigh.

“Yes, I’ll endeavor to live up to your high expectations,” he said, placing his hand on his heart and flashing us a winning smile.

“Me too! Thank you so much! I’ll never forget what you did for us!” Charnée added with deep emotion as she bowed her head.

Afterward, Viscount Persimmon arranged a small banquet to celebrate the end of the threat, treating us to every luxury he could manage.

News of the Fenrir’s defeat reached all the inhabitants of the viscount’s land, and the air of celebration spread. Now, at last, they could look forward to restoring their lives and livelihoods. Personally, I hoped that they all took this time to enjoy themselves, too.

“Ah, it was a heck of a monster, that Fenrir was,” I heard Garkie mutter, his hands full with meat and wine.

Navre frowned at his companion, before letting out an exasperated sigh. “It *was* terrible,” he said softly. “The real thing was completely different from the records of past Fenrirs…”

“It’s galling, really. We’re supposed to be their bodyguards, but if it hadn’t been for Princess Anisphia and Queen Euphyllia…”

“The Fenrir sure was amazing, but Her Majesty and Her Highness were something else entirely… I’ve always admired Queen Euphyllia ever since I was a student, but when she became a spirit covenantor, it was like she rose to impossible new heights…”

“Then there’s Princess Anisphia. What was she even doing? I’m

going to end up losing my sense of self-worth as a knight…"

"Gark. You should watch your words …!"

Garkie was busy joking lightheartedly, while Navre's eyes widened in shock. I, however, didn't mind their banter, watching on with a soft smile.

"We really were lucky," I said. "That Fenrir could have caused all kinds of havoc. I wanted to avoid any more damage to Viscount Persimmon's holdings."

"That might be true, but it was just a coincidence you were there, Princess Anisphia. How many people here in the east can hope to compete with *that*…?" Navre asked.

"No—a monster of that level? It would take an entire squad of knights to take it down, right?" Garkie murmured.

"Yes, but I can think of a good many knightly forces who should have been able to stop it," I pointed out.

"Sure, but even so…"

While I was busy talking to Garkie and Navre, Euphie approached with a drink in one hand. "It seems the situation here in the east is still dire," she said.

"Euphie," I greeted her.

Navre hurried to put a hand on his chest as he bowed deeply. "I must apologize for putting in such a poor performance as your escort today, Your Majesty."

"Please raise your head, Navre. I don't know what to say. Anis and I are out of the ordinary. For two people to confront a Fenrir alone—under normal circumstances, that would indeed be unthinkable," Euphie said in a calm voice.

Navre looked up slowly, his expression conflicted.

"And you're still a novice knight. It would be beyond reckless for you to challenge such a creature. That being said, seeing that threat for yourself must have been a beneficial experience."

"…Yes."

"In that case, please put a little more thought into what you just said, Navre."

"…A little more thought?"

"No matter how powerful our talents, Anis and I are only two individuals. It would be quite impossible for us to deal with every disaster alone."

"That's…true, yes."

"And I'm also aware that not everyone will be able to reach this

level. Still, I believe that Anis's magical tools have the ability to bring such potential closer to our reach."

"Through magical tools…?"

"Indeed. That is why I believe the development of the eastern territories is essential for all of the Kingdom of Palettia. To develop those tools, we need to secure more spirit-based resources. I don't think there's any need to distinguish between nobles and commoners as far as that is concerned. We live in an age where the ability to use magic needn't separate us."

"…Your Majesty, do you want the aristocracy to relinquish their magical authority?" Navre asked with a serious look.

Euphie gave him a soft smile. "I want to create a new era, one in which authority is vested in more than magic. A future in which magic isn't an authority, per se, but one of many talents with great potential. That's the kind of future that Anis and I would like to see."

"…Do you really think it's possible?"

"It will take a long time to realize, but there's no hurry. We will keep moving forward, generation after generation, hoping for the day when it becomes a matter of course. We mustn't forget the lessons of our forebears, but we mustn't obsess over tradition, either. As leaders, we must always keep in mind the best interests of the kingdom and its people."

Even after hearing all this, Navre was still visibly troubled. Euphie glanced down at her own palm.

"Never be satisfied with the status quo, and never stop thinking about the future… I'm sure he would have wanted to live that way," she murmured softly.

"…Your Majesty." Navre glanced up in surprise, wrinkling his brow and closing his eyes. After a moment of silence, he slowly nodded his head. "…I'm not sure if the future you have in mind is the best one, Your Majesty. So I'd like to think a bit more on it before I give you a proper answer."

"Yes, please do," Euphie answered.

"…This is all over my head, but basically, we've got to keep doing what we can, and never give up thinking of new solutions. Right, Your Highness?" Garkie asked in a low voice so that Euphie and Navre wouldn't hear.

"Now isn't the time to be asking follow-up questions," I muttered with a weak sigh.

Keep on thinking about the future, huh? I closed my eyes, my thoughts turning to Allie—the person Euphie had been thinking of a moment ago. My brother had nearly been crushed under the weight of responsibility and expectation being thrown on him. It was enough to make anyone want to cry out loud.

"…Anis?"

I approached Euphie's side and leaned against her shoulder.

After flashing me a somewhat dubious look, she wrapped her arm around my shoulders as though suddenly realizing something.

"Navre, Gark, I think it's time we all got some rest," she said. "Anis hasn't been involved in a battle like that for quite some time, and I think she's getting tired."

"Understood. I'll tell Viscount Persimmon," Navre responded.

"Thank you. In that case, we'll retire for the night."

With those words, Euphie started leading me away, her arm still around me. I reached up and took her hand, intertwining our fingers.

The two of us left the hall for the bedroom set aside for us. As we walked there, I leaned up against Euphie and pressed my forehead against hers.

She let out a small laugh before calling out my name in a gentle voice. "Anis? What's come over you all of a sudden?"

"Hmm… I used my dragon magic earlier, and now I guess I feel like spoiling you."

"I see." Euphie continued walking without asking any further questions.

She opened the bedroom door and let me in first, then closed and locked it behind her.

The next moment, she placed a hand on my face, lifted my chin, and kissed me on the mouth. I accepted the gesture without resisting, closing my eyes and letting her do as she pleased.

After exchanging a few light kisses, I stepped back to a close distance. "…You know, Euphie?" I whispered.

"What is it?"

“I’m just a little tired today. But I want to spoil you so, so much…”

“Yes, I know,” she answered, raining down on me with a fresh barrage of kisses.

It was so comfortable letting her touch me that I wanted to purr with delight.

Yes, it had been a long time since I had last used my dragon magic, and I was still overflowing with energy. On top of that, I had begun digging up past memories.

So all I wanted right now was to lean on her a little bit.

“Don’t worry, Anis. You can spoil me all you need,” Euphie said teasingly.

“…Shut up,” I said, headbutting her lightly, before relaxing to let her take care of me.

She gave me a sweet, loving smile. I almost expected her to start humming a happy tune. It was a little irritating—but just a little.

* * *

With the notable exception of our unexpected encounter with the Fenrir, our stay at Viscount Persimmon’s mansion passed without incident.

The time came for us to leave the Persimmon estate, and the viscount’s family and his retainers saw us off.

“We’re almost at the end of the tour, aren’t we?” Euphie said.

“Huh? Really?” I asked. “We’ve already gone through most of our itinerary?”

“…Anis. I knew it. You *weren’t* paying attention when we discussed our schedule, were you?”

“Ngh!”

During our first break after leaving the viscount’s territory, Euphie lashed out at me like a snake darting out from a bush.

And it wasn’t just her—everyone had been glowering at me, as though having fully expected this to happen. I couldn’t stand it!

Back when we were planning the trip, I had simply been so happy that the Airbikes were being put to use that I had zoned out!

The fact that it had all sounded like a honeymoon with Euphie hadn't helped.

But while I was busy making excuses to myself, Euphie rested a hand on her forehead and let out a deep sigh.

"…I thought you might not have been listening. There was no way you could be so laid-back all this time if you had known."

"Huh?"

"The next stop will be the last of the territories that we'll be visiting. You've been so calm, I thought you might not have heard or realized what it meant, and it seems I was right."

"Er…? May I ask what you mean?" I said, turning suddenly to polite language while I checked everyone's expressions.

It was Lainie who answered my question. "Lady Anis, the territory we're heading to next is Count Ochre's frontier territory."

"…Huh? Count Ochre's frontier territory?" I echoed back.

I knew that name well, which was why I was so taken aback.

That was where my brother, Allie, had been banished after being disinherited.

CHAPTER 5

Count Ochre's frontier territory was the easternmost region of the Kingdom of Paletta.

Being on the kingdom's border, the territory received generous assistance from the state. However, even with this support, its denizens had been forced into lives of poverty. There had been little progress in terms of cultivation, and day after day was spent fighting the monsters that encroached on habitable land. As a result, no major urban developments had proved successful.

The situation being what it was, the territory had become a place where criminals were forced into military service, leading to overall poor security. Some more outspoken individuals had even taken to calling it a penal colony.

For that reason, the family managing the territory had been replaced several times, leading to the area's reputation as a fiefdom with an ever-changing cycle of masters. Even the current count maintained his mansion close to the border to avoid having to reside too deep within the territory.

Allie, it seemed, lived in a mansion far from any other human settlement.

From what I'd heard, the building had once been abandoned after a stampede swept over it.

It was said to be located in the middle of a dark and eerie forest. The canopy was so thick, the sun could hardly penetrate it.

"It's almost as dark as the Black Forest in here…," Euphie whispered.

"Yep…" I nodded in agreement.

It was the kind of spooky place that children might dare each other to visit at night.

Proceeding through the dim forest, the mansion where Allie lived finally entered our line of sight.

The garden was largely overgrown, barely maintained, and the outer walls were partially rotting, with ivy growing in all directions. Altogether, it was a shocking sight.

We halted in the air as we looked across at the mansion.

"It almost looks like something might jump out at you if you

came here after sundown…," I remarked softly.

"To think that Algard is living in a place like this…," Euphie added.

So this is where Allie is…

I hadn't been able to stop thinking about him since learning that his current residence was the last stop on our royal tour.

How was I supposed to react, seeing him again after all this time? I had been so preoccupied with that question that I couldn't think of anything else.

I was, of course, also curious as to why Euphie had decided to make this the last stop on our journey, but my first concern was whether I even had the right to show myself before my brother.

After all, I was the one who had driven him here.

He didn't seem to resent me. During our last meeting, we had shaken hands in an effort to make up.

But that didn't mean that he would be happy to see me again and pretend everything was normal. I simply didn't know how to approach him here.

If you were to ask me whether I wanted to see him, my answer would be of course I did. But I was equally sure that I had no right to request a meeting, and he wouldn't want to see me anyway.

And so I had come all this way with a conflicted heart. Still, I couldn't turn back now. I had to meet Allie, even if I didn't feel worthy.

What kind of life would he be living in a place like this? How did he feel about it all? But if I was to start asking myself questions along those lines, there would be no end to it.

"Anis."

"Euphie?"

"…It will be fine. I'm sure of it."

So she said, but to be honest, she appeared somewhat nervous, too.

Nevertheless, she had decided to meet Allie. I couldn't stand here forever. I clapped my cheeks slightly, hoping to regain my composure.

Once that pain had cleared, I suddenly realized something.

"…What are we supposed to do here?"

We had arrived at the mansion, but the gate was hanging ajar, with no gatekeepers in sight.

Should we just walk inside and call out? I mean, there weren't

any other options, were there? We were going to have to raise our voices.

"There must be people inside," I said. "Maybe we should call out to them?"

"I'll go first, Lady Anis," Garkie said, lightly raising a hand into the air as he volunteered himself.

He set foot in the courtyard, about to make his way straight for the mansion's front door, when—

"Halt!"

Something jumped out from the shadows, blocking his way.

The figure in our path was a young girl. She looked younger than us, around the age when she might consider starting at the Aristocratic Academy.

Our eyes widened in surprise as we took this sight in.

Her silvery-gray hair reached down to her waist, tied up behind her back. But on her head—were wolf ears, the same color as her hair.

I could even make out what looked like a wagging tail. It was unmistakably real. And the pupils in her blue eyes were elongated and animal-like. All of us were stunned by the appearance of this half-human, half-beast girl.

“Beastfolk…?”

That was the term given to humanoid monsters, but this girl was more person-like than any other monster I had ever encountered. Except for her wolf ears and tail, she looked completely human.

What in the world was she? And why was she lurking in the courtyard, blocking our way?

“Trespassers! State your names!” she called out in a display of hostility and caution.

The way she spoke sounded somewhat old-fashioned—as though she wasn’t quite used to talking this way. It was a strange discrepancy, but now wasn’t the time to worry about that.

“Um, well, we’re…”

“What are *you* doing here?! You, over there!” the wolf girl interrupted me, barking at Lainie.

“Huh?! M-me?!” Lainie exclaimed at being singled out all of a sudden.

The wolf girl’s eyes narrowed.

“You—you’re a vampire, are you not?”

“…Huh?!”

My apprehension rose again, as did Euphie’s and Ilia’s. The girl had pointed this out so easily.

Garkie, Halphys, and Navre, who still didn’t know about vampires, watched this exchange with doubt on their faces.

Unbelievable, right? How could this girl possibly have known that Lainie was a vampire?!

“And you… Are you really human? You have a strange aura about you,” the girl said, pointing this time to Euphie.

Euphie remained silent in the face of these suspicions.

So this girl could sense not only vampires, but spirit covenantors, too? Who on earth was she?

“Hello…,” I began, when—

“And you,” she interrupted, turning her gaze on me.

She stared my way, wrinkling her brow as though she didn’t quite like what she had found.

“You… I don’t know what it is, but you feel dangerous… And

you look like *him*."

"…I do?"

"You—do you have something to do with Al?"

"Al… You mean Allie?!" I blurted out at the sound of his name.

Was this wolf girl an acquaintance of his?

Her eyes widened slightly at this reaction. "No… Are you Anisphia?"

"…Yes…," I answered.

The next moment, I braced myself against the wave of hostility emanating from the wolf girl.

"You're…," she spit, as though I were some kind of rat in her kitchen, "Anisphia…!"

"U-um… If you could hear me out for a second…"

"Anis! Step back!" Euphie declared in a sharp voice, her expression grim as she moved to take my place. Her hand was resting on the Arc-en-Ciel, ready to draw it at a moment's notice.

Enough already! This situation was out of control! And Euphie was queen! She was in no position to be throwing herself in harm's way!

"Acryl, wait! These people aren't our enemies!"

Before the tension could explode, a new voice interjected.

It belonged to an elderly man in a butler uniform, who had appeared from the door of the mansion.

Euphie's expression softened as she laid eyes on him. "Clive," she called out. "It's been so long."

"Your Majesty. You're keeping well, I see. I must apologize to our guests. I'm afraid I must not have explained your visit to this youngster adequately… Please forgive me." The man, Clive, offered us a polite bow, apologizing for the wolf girl's attitude.

The girl followed the butler's example and let her hostility simmer down into a pout.

Breathing a sigh of relief at his appearance, I called out to him myself. "Clive. How long has it been?"

"Too long, Princess Anisphia. Oh, you've grown… Ah, yes, I should call you Your Highness, shouldn't I?"

"You've been in retirement for, what, ten years? I'm glad to see you're doing well."

Clive used to serve in the royal palace as my father's trusted retainer, responsible for educating me, Allie, and even Euphie as Allie's future wife and queen.

He had left our service on account of his advanced age, but upon learning that Allie was being banished to the frontier, he had volunteered to serve as his overseer.

"Thank you for coming all the way to the frontier even in your retirement," I said to him.

"Allow me to thank you as well for accompanying Prince Algard," Euphie offered.

"Your Majesty, Your Highness… Not at all. I also feel some degree of responsibility for Master Algard's treatment. I've endeavored to make this my final act of service."

"…There's much we should talk about, but can I ask you something first?" I said, looking askance at the wolf girl, who was still glaring my way.

With a wry, uneasy smile, Clive wiped the sweat from his forehead. "This is Acryl, a guest staying here at the mansion. As you can see, she's…"

"…Got wolf ears and a tail, right? Are they real?" I asked, watching her carefully.

"Don't stare," the girl replied, breaking into a scowl. "All Lycants have ears and a tail."

"A Lycant?"

"Her tribe—or should I say, her race—could be described as humans imbued with magicite…," Clive explained.

"Humans with magicite?!" I stared back at her with amazement.

So she was much the same as a vampire. That certainly explained the ears and the tail. That meant she was somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between human and monster.

"She has magicite… So she's a monster?" Halphys murmured in consternation.

"Lycants are *not* mere monsters," Acryl spit back.

"Acryl, please don't intimidate our guests," Clive remonstrated. "That would be an inconvenience to Master Algard."

"…Hmph," she answered, falling silent.

This was a shocking encounter. We had come here to see Allie, and I'd been so worried about how to act when I saw him again—and now those worries were far from my mind.

"Clive, may we go inside for the time being? Allie is also aware of this girl's circumstances, right? I'd like to hear more from him."

"Of course. Allow me to show you inside."

With Clive's approval, we moved the Airdra and the Airbikes

into the courtyard and set foot into the mansion.

In sharp contrast to the mansion's exterior, the inside was clean and tidy. We made our way down the corridor side by side until Clive stopped in front of one of the rooms.

"Master Algard," he said. "Her Majesty Queen Euphyllia and her entourage are here to see you."

"…Enter."

The voice that sounded from beyond the door made my heart skip a beat.

I swallowed hard; my throat was suddenly parched. The next moment, Clive opened the door and ushered us in.

And then—I saw Allie again for the first time in forever.

His platinum hair was just like mine, while his crimson eyes couldn't have been more different. He was dressed modestly compared to when he had lived in the royal palace, and he looked to have grown taller than I remembered.

"Queen Euphyllia, Princess Anisphia—thank you for your kind visit," Allie said, dropping to his knees respectfully.

Euphie startled for a moment, her eyes widening as she visibly gulped, but she soon exhaled and took a step before him.

"Please, raise your head. There's no need to kneel," she said.

"As Your Majesty's subject, I ought to treat you with obeisance and respect. I'm a criminal. It would be presumptuous for me to look upon your face."

"…In that case, I forgive you. Please relax."

"…Understood." After a short pause, Allie rose slowly to his feet.

The two of them, meeting again after all this time, exchanged awkward smiles.

"…There are only familiar faces here today, so please act normally, the way you used to. Standing on ceremony will only make us all uncomfortable."

"You're going out of your way to protect the feelings of a subject?" Allie asked.

"You know, you sound a little sarcastic when you say it like that," Euphie answered.

"Hmm. Not very gracious, are we?"

After exchanging a few casual words, both Euphie and Allie started chuckling.

I, too, was taken aback by their conversation. Euphie, it

seemed, was less hesitant speaking with Allie than I had expected. And I wasn't the only one at a loss—Navre was surprised, too.

A moment later, Allie turned to the rest of us in embarrassment. "You all seem to be having trouble finding words," he said.

"You could say that," Euphie responded. "That girl earlier startled us a bit, too…"

"Ah, Acryl? Sorry, did she make a scene? I must not have explained the situation to her well enough. I sent Clive to meet you as soon as I could, but it's my fault if she was rude to you. Please don't punish her. She's still unfamiliar with how we do things here in the Kingdom of Palettia."

"You don't need to bow your head. But could you tell us more about her?"

"I don't blame you for being curious. But…you don't mind if I talk about myself, too, do you?" Allie said, glancing at Navre, Garkie, and Halphys.

Euphie recognized at once the meaning behind that look, and she nodded back. "I was planning on telling everyone when we got here in any event…"

"Now that Acryl has identified Lainie as a vampire, we need to explain everything…," I added.

"I see… I really am sorry. First things first, take a seat. This is going to be a long story," Allie said. "Could you prepare us some tea, Clive?"

"Very well…"

Clive left the room to ready drinks, while we sat down on the sofa as indicated.

Once we were all seated, Allie turned to Acryl, who was now sitting by his side. "Where should I begin? Did she already introduce herself as a Lycant?"

"Yes."

"As you can see, Lycants are a race of people with wolf ears and tails, along with heightened physical abilities. You might describe them as something in between humans and monsters. Long ago, they formed a pack of sorts, passing their magicite down from generation to generation."

"That's incredible…"

"As you may have guessed, Acryl isn't from the Kingdom of Palettia. She hails from a place far to the east."

"You mean, she's from the Kingdom of Cambus?"

While Euphie may have surmised part of this, Allie's explanation still caught her off guard.

The eastern edge of the Kingdom of Palettia ran up against deep forest and steep mountain ranges, which constituted the borderline. The Kingdom of Cambus was located yet farther east. But this was certainly news, the reason being our relationship with our neighbors.

"Even though the Kingdom of Cambus is known to us, there is little interaction between the two nations—really only the occasional trader journeying to border outposts."

Right. As Euphie had said, we knew remarkably little about the Kingdom of Cambus.

Even if we tried to contact them, any emissaries would be forced to brave perilous mountain paths. Nor did our neighbors show themselves until anyone approached their border, and they seemed to have little inclination of establishing relations with our own kingdom.

Even so, their traders offered rare pieces of magicite and monster materials, so determined merchants sometimes hired adventurers to escort them on trading missions.

Allie, however, wore a complicated expression as he shook his head. "That's the natural conclusion to reach, but you would be mistaken…"

"…Then where…?"

"Acryl lived among the Lycant tribe, and it isn't clear whether that was under the jurisdiction of the Kingdom of Cambus. I only know what I've surmised from my discussions with her. Ultimately, all I can say is that she comes to us from somewhere a great distance east of here."

"So her tribe didn't belong to any country?" Euphie asked, perplexed. "If we're to take that at face value, they probably aren't connected to the Kingdom of Cambus, then…"

The rest of us were equally unsure what to do with this information—and that was when Clive returned with a cart loaded with tea.

"Allow me to help, Clive," Ilia ventured.

"Ah, me too!" Lainie said, following suit.

"Thank you, Ilia. And you too, young lady."

It was no doubt hard for the two of them to sit idly while someone else saw to what they regarded as their own responsibility.

Acryl watched Ilia from her chair with interest. “Do you know that woman, Clive?” she asked.

“Ilia? In addition to serving as a teacher, I was also an attendant to King Orphans, and she was one of my students at the time.”

“So she is my senior?”

“You might say that, yes.”

Hearing all this, Acryl followed Ilia’s actions with heightened curiosity. Meanwhile, Ilia herself gracefully served the tea while paying little attention to the wolf girl’s gaze.

Taking a deep breath, Navre raised his hand with a question of his own. “Um, I’m sorry for asking this. Just to be clear, who’s the vampire you mentioned earlier? You didn’t mean Lainie, did you…?” he asked, bewildered.

Euphie and I exchanged measured glances before nodding in response.

“This is a national secret, so it’s for your ears only. I want you to listen carefully,” I said.

“The consequences for the kingdom could be severe indeed if you divulge any of this,” Euphie added.

“I-is it that serious…?”

“To really understand the situation, we need to go back to when Allie broke off his engagement with Euphie…,” I began.

And so we explained everything that had happened behind the scenes, revealing how Lainie and Allie were vampires and the true nature of their condition.

Navre and Halphys listened, wide-eyed, from start to finish. Meanwhile, I felt like I was losing my mind, unable to tell whether Garkie fully understood. But at last, the story reached its conclusion.

“So that’s the real chain of events behind the end of their engagement and why Allie was banished to the frontier,” I finished.

“I never caught on…,” Navre murmured. “Then that’s why the Chartreuse family was punished, and Moritz, too…”

“To tell the truth, I would have had no defense if I had been sentenced to beheading for my role. I don’t expect your forgiveness for taking advantage of you, Navre, but I do apologize. Your disgrace was entirely the result of my own immoral course of action,” Allie said with a deep bow of his head.

Navre caught his breath, but soon exhaled and shook his head.

“There’s no need for that, Prince Algard. I was unaware of any conspiracy behind the annulment of your betrothal. I wasn’t strong enough to serve at your side. So there’s no need for you to apologize to me. No, I’m ashamed to say that I can’t even begin to understand your anguish.”

“You’re not at fault, by any means. You were too honest and up-front—that was all. I was wrong to take advantage of you—and I swear never to bring shame to anyone again.”

“…I feel the same way, Prince Algard.”

The two young men continued to exchange calm, though awkward, smiles. Watching them, I lifted a hand to my chest in relief.

“On the subject of vampires, they’re another race somewhere in between human and monster. It’s very strange to hear how the condition can be passed down from parent to child…,” Halphys murmured, studying Lainie.

Lainie herself swayed uncomfortably for a moment, prompting Ilia to take her hand to steady her.

“I understand from your explanation how vampires are born… but what about Lycants?” Halphys asked.

“The stories say that we were given our abilities by our venerable ancestors, becoming what we are today,” Acryl responded calmly.

…Why did I get the impression that she took a particular attitude when it came to dealing with me?

“So one of your ancestors was a monster? A wolf-like creature, do you mean?”

“Yes, my people say our ancestors were wolves. There are others, too, besides Lycants. They all received powers of their own from their ancestors and lived in their own territories.”

“Other clans besides the Lycant… That is indeed very intriguing.”

Acryl’s story seemed to have aroused Halphys’s curiosity. And mine as well, but first things first…

“I understand Acryl’s situation, but what is she doing here?” I asked.

At this question, Allie hesitated.

“…Acryl fled across the eastern mountain range before reaching this mansion.”

And so, his voice low and quiet, he began to explain how the two of them first met.

CHAPTER 6

Hunger.

It was hard to breathe, and I thought my consciousness would fade forever from starvation.

My body was exhausted, my throat parched. But I forced my legs to carry me forward step by step.

I had to go farther, farther away. Anywhere not here. I had to leave this place.

That was all I could think about. Unable to dwell on anything else, I dragged my tired body forward.

"…Ah."

I kept walking on and on, until I found a huge, rickety house. Something smelled good—enough to make my stomach growl.

Food…

I hadn't had anything decent to eat in days. I could feel my mouth filling with drool.

That tantalizing smell drew me toward the building. There were no guards in sight, making it easy to sneak inside.

…I sense people.

The house looked dilapidated, but the interior was clean and tidy.

There were signs of habitation, but I couldn't see anyone. Hiding my presence as best I could, I proceeded forward.

At last, I arrived at the source of the smell. What looked like a full meal was there laid out before me—and the moment I saw it, something caught in my throat.

I can't take it anymore!

I was hungrier than I'd ever been, and my brain could barely keep up. I jumped for the food on the table, throwing away every last shred of caution.

"I see we have a rare visitor."

"…?!"

A voice sounded behind me—but before I could look over my shoulder, the world turned upside down.

Before I knew it, a rope of water had wrapped itself around my body, binding my arms together. Then, still upside-down, a young

man appeared.

His platinum hair was disproportionately bright for someone who lived in this eerie old mansion, and his face was so well proportioned (with ominous crimson eyes) that I couldn't look away.

Those eyes brought back unpleasant memories, sending shivers down my spine. But this wasn't the time for fear. I snarled and howled, "Let me go! Release me, cur!"

"…So now you talk? You're a lively one, for an intruder." The youth sighed with amazement.

The next moment, he reached out and touched my head—or more precisely, my *ears*.

"…Are these real?" he asked after poking them a few times.

"Do not touch me!"

I shook the man's hand away. Those were my wolf ears, the same color as my hair. Only relatives were allowed to touch them, and he hadn't even asked permission.

I glared across at him, disgust welling inside me, and I did my best to look and sound as menacing as possible.

The man, however, continued to observe me carefully. "Are you a werewolf? No…you look more human than that."

"I am no werewolf! I am a proud Lycant!"

"And why would a proud Lycant try to steal food? What gives you the right to sneak into other people's houses and help yourself to their meals?"

"Ugh…," I groaned. The man's point was so obvious that I couldn't respond.

A second later, my stomach let out a wistful growl. A wave of shame washed over me.

The man looked down at me, his eyes widening. "…If you answer my questions, you can have the whole meal."

"What?"

"But in exchange, I want you to promise not to run away, and not to harm me. How about it?"

"…And—thou speakest truth?"

"I swear it," he answered readily.

I continued to stare at him, overcome with suspicion.

That feeling, however, didn't last for long. I was ravenous. My body couldn't take any more of this.

"…I swear it."

“Good,” he replied, and the rope of water disappeared.

I succeeded in landing on my feet, even if I did stagger slightly.

“Here. Eat up,” the youth said, pulling out a chair and motioning for me to sit down.

I did as instructed and reached for the food on the table.

The bread was still warm, and then there was the soup, filled with meat and vegetables. I wanted to leap up and devour it all, but I made sure to sniff around first to make sure it wasn’t a trap.

There was nothing at all suspicious about it, but I couldn’t help staring at the bread and soup with an unrelenting sense of caution. I let out a low growl, when the man sitting across from me heaved a sigh.

“Hah… Here,” he said.

“Ah…”

The man made a show of picking up a spoon and taking a sip of the soup, then cutting a small piece from the bread for a bite. After chewing on it for a moment and swallowing it down, he said quietly, “As you can see, there’s no poison in it. I didn’t have time to add any either, did I?”

“…”

“If you really don’t want it, I’ll eat it all myself…”

“…I—I shall eat it!”

After a moment’s hesitation, I leaned forward and snatched the spoon from his hand, then proceeded to tear out chunks of the bread and shovel soup into my mouth with single-minded vigor.

As I devoured the bread, I was struck by an experience that I hadn’t felt in ages.

“’Tis delicious…delicious…!”

Tears spilled down my cheeks. I hadn’t had such a proper meal in a long, long time. My last one, several days ago, had been raw meat that I had barely managed to keep down.

An actual dinner like this was a dream come true. I nearly found myself doubting whether any of this was real, but my mind was too occupied with food.

“Calm down or you’ll spill it. It’s all yours, so there’s no need to rush. No one’s going to take it away from you. Do you want seconds?”

“There is more…? Verily?! Yes! Yes, please!”

“Didn’t I just tell you to calm down…? Well, all right. Hold on a second.”

The man took my empty soup bowl, poured me a fresh serving, then handed it back to me.

Once the bread was all gone, I continued to sip the soup until my stomach was nearly bloated. All the while, I couldn't stop crying.

"Are you satisfied?" the man asked, having watched me the whole time.

"…"

I nodded. I doubted that my stomach could fit even one more mouthful of soup in it.

"Then it's my turn to ask you some more questions in exchange. You have no right to refuse, understand?"

"…"

"First, tell me your name."

"…I am called…Acryl," I said to him.

Acryl, he mouthed, feeling the word out on his tongue. "Acryl? Did you cross the border—the mountains—by any chance?"

"…Why askest thou such things?"

"Because you have an old-fashioned way of speaking. It's a lot like what we consider archaic language here in the Kingdom of Palettia."

"The Kingdom of Palettia?" I echoed, tilting my head to one side at the unfamiliar words.

The young man wrinkled his brow. "You're not from the Kingdom of Cambus, are you?"

"What is the Kingdom of Cambus…?"

"So you don't know…? In that case, where did you come from?"

"…I know not."

"You don't?"

I had no answer to that question.

I hardly knew where I was *now*, much less where I had been before I came here.

"I *did* come over the mountains, but I know nothing of these kingdoms of Palettia or Cambus."

"Where were you before you crossed over the mountains?"

"…I was captured."

"Captured? Why?"

"…Must I tell thee?"

With my stomach full, I finally summoned the energy to be on

guard.

I was thankful for the meal that he had given me, but I didn't trust him enough to reveal so much.

"…Hmm. I would like to know, but maybe that's a delicate subject for now?"

The youth didn't seem offended, simply nodding along in thought. In truth, I was rather disappointed by his reaction.

"Acryl, was it? You don't even know where you are right now, do you?"

"…No. But why…?"

“In that case, why don’t you stay here for a while?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’ll provide you with food and shelter. In exchange, I’d like you to answer more of my questions down the line. How about it?”

“…Why?”

“Because I’ve taken an interest in you. I want to know who you are, I want to know more about Lycants, and I want to hear how you crossed over the mountains.”

At first, I had no idea what he was going on about. But his honesty was plain. How ought I to respond?

“Well, you don’t have any right to refuse,” he said with a snort. “If you refuse, you would be a thief, and *I* would have every right to punish you.”

“…But I…”

“Yet I have nothing to gain by punishing you,” he said firmly.

From the very beginning, he had been in complete control of the conversation.

“That’s why,” he continued, “I want you to accept this deal. I’ll satisfy my curiosity, and you’ll satisfy your hunger. Not a bad trade, wouldn’t you say?”

“…You might be lying.”

“I don’t mind if you don’t trust me, but do you have any other plans for finding food?”

“Ugh…”

“In that case, what are you going to do?”

I remained silent for a while, peering into his face. All the same, I knew that his proposal would be in my best interest. And he was right—I had nowhere else to go.

“…All right. I shall stay here.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that.”

“…And what is thy name?” I asked him.

For a second, a trace of some expression passed over his face. But he quickly flashed me a wry smile and said, “Al… Just Al. Call me Al.”

“…Al.”

When I said his name aloud, I caught a wistful look in his eyes.

I couldn’t tell why he reacted that way, but I knew better than to ask.

“Acryl. I would be happy for you to live here in the mansion, but there are a few conditions on your stay.”

“And what would those be?”

“First, you’ll have to study. People might not understand your old-fashioned way of speaking. On top of that, you need to learn the everyday customs of the Kingdom of Palettia.”

“I see.”

“I’ll give you a room, but I want you to stay there for the most part. With those animal ears and tail, you might be mistaken for a monster.”

“Lycants are no monsters!”

“That’s common knowledge to you, isn’t it? But we haven’t had any interactions with Lycants before.”

So Al said, but I doubted whether that was true. Now that I had a full stomach, I could think, and Al’s eyes led me to an idea.

If my guess was right, it would be strange if he didn’t know about Lycants.

“So the name of my kin is foreign to thine ears?”

“Yes.”

“…And yet thou art a vampire.”

Al’s eyes widened at this question. A moment later, he peered at me more closely and lowered his voice. “…You know about vampires?”

“…Oughtn’t I?” I responded.

There could be no mistaking that Al seemed warier of me than he had before. I hadn’t wanted to ask such an awkward question, but it was said and done now…

“Wilt thou not suffer retribution for failing to capture me, vampire?”

“What are you talking about…?”

“…Or perhaps thy tribe is not the one I know?”

“Hold on. Wait. How do you even know about vampires in the first place? And a tribe? Do you mean, there’s something like a vampire settlement?”

“Hm? I know not…”

I was half surprised, half relieved. By all appearances, Al wasn’t connected to the vampires I knew.

Then, maybe I ought to tell him about my situation?

“I crossed over the mountains…because I was fleeing vampires…”

“You were?”

“They were always a wicked people; they caught and enslaved me. So I escaped. That is how I found my way here…”

That was why I had come all this way.

Al’s face turned stern, and he raised a hand to his chin in thought. “…There are even more questions I need to ask you, Acryl. I see there’s a lot we don’t know about each other, and I’d like to fix that. First, are you worried about pursuers?”

“…I cannot say. I know not why they took me.”

“Do Lycants and vampires have any interactions with each other?”

“We know of each other, nothing more. Each tribe keeps to its own territory to avoid conflict. We have no other relationship.”

“Interesting… Does that mean there are other tribes like yours?”

Al had taken an interest in what I had told him, asking question after question. Somehow, he looked younger as he posed that last one.

He was mature and calm. At the same time, he seemed truly happy as his curiosity carried him away—and I was intrigued by this dual nature of his.

We spent a good length of time talking about each other’s lives and sharing what we knew.

Apparently, Al came from a “country,” a place called the Kingdom of Palettia. The equivalent of a tribal chief was called a “king,” and he was supported by his “nobles,” who were in turn supported by “commoners.”

The Kingdom of Palettia’s territory was much larger than the Lycant settlement, and its denizens were greater in number than I could possibly imagine.

That seemed to be why chiefs were needed to rule each area on behalf of the king—the nobles that Al had mentioned.

Strictly speaking, it was a little more complicated, he insisted, but since I couldn’t grasp the scale of it all, he was happy to leave his explanation at that.

On the other hand, he was quick to understand everything I told him about my Lycant tribe. I was so impressed—he seemed to be a very clever person indeed.

After we had each explained our backgrounds to some extent, Al nodded in satisfaction. “I see. From the outside, it looks like a

closed society, but from the inside, it's a free and open one. It seems Lycants live simpler lives and let nature lead them."

"Is the Kingdom of Palettia…a *complicated* place?" I asked, head tilted to one side as I tried to understand the meaning behind his words.

After all my wandering, and now this deep discussion, I could feel fatigue and drowsiness building up inside me.

"…I've let my curiosity get the better of me, and I've pushed you too hard. Let me get your room ready so you can go to bed," Al offered.

"No…I will be all right. Perhaps I needed to talk about it."

"I see. Well, just wait a little longer while I get your room ready."

Now that the topic of sleep had been mentioned, I realized that I was too tired to even keep my eyelids open.

But thanks to that long conversation, I was starting to feel that I could trust him.

He's a vampire, but he's nothing like any vampire I've seen…

Those thoughts only added to my weariness. I couldn't stay awake anymore; I shut my eyes, laying my head on my arms atop the table as a pillow.

In the blink of an eye, I had fallen fast asleep.

* * *

I could smell blood.

My vision filled with red spray; the stench was so thick that it overwhelmed my senses, and bile rose in my throat.

Moaning. Screams. Earsplitting shrieks. I could feel myself going mad as I listened.

And mixed into it all was a noise. Ah, here it came. I was going to have to fight.

Right. Here, if I didn't fight, if I didn't kill—*I* would be killed.

Which was why I would kill again today. I would take life after life, until I couldn't smell the blood anymore.

"Haah… Haah… Haah…!"

I woke up with a start, only then realizing that it had all been a dream.

There was no stench of blood prickling my nose. No veil of red liquid. Only a strange room and plain bedsheets.

For a second, panic hit me as I wondered where I was. But I soon regained my composure when I remembered Al, the young man I had met before falling asleep.

Right, I must have dozed off… Is this the room Al mentioned?

Completely exhausted, I lay back down on the sheets.

The soft fabrics smelled like the sun, and they seemed to grow warmer as they rubbed against my skin.

The vestiges of my dream were already fading. Just the thought that I might be safe here was enough to make tears slowly well up in my eyes.

"…It smells good here."

I buried my face in the blanket, wrapping it around my body, then closed my eyes and let my tears seep into its soft touch and pleasant smell.

I had been wandering for so long, spent so many cold nights out in the open. For a while, I had even wondered whether such would be my life forever—but then I had met Al.

I owed him an apology for trying to steal his food, but I was so very glad I had met him.

"…Right, Al."

I may have woken up, but I understood that I wasn't supposed to leave my room. It wouldn't be good for me to encounter someone from the Kingdom of Palettia who didn't know anything about Lycants.

But what should I do? Should I wait for Al to come see me?

"Acryl? Are you awake?"

"Agh?!"

At that very moment, Al's voice sounded from the other side of the door, leaving me so surprised that I physically jumped.

"I've brought breakfast. May I come in?"

"You may."

My heart was still pounding, but my ears had perked up at the mention of breakfast.

Al stepped into the room and handed me a tray loaded with breakfast.

There were no desks or chairs in the room, so I sat down on the

edge of the bed and started to eat. The fare was almost identical to the soup and bread that I had eaten the day before, but it was delicious all the same. I didn't mind.

"Is it good?" Al asked.

"Very!" I answered.

"I'm sure the cook will be pleased to hear that."

"Wilt thou not eat as well?"

"I've already finished."

"Oh."

A casual conversation between me and Al—a sign of everyday life that I had almost forgotten since being captured by vampires and escaping to freedom.

It was warm. Was that because Al was here? The happiness that I was enjoying now was thanks to his forgiveness.

"Al?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you," I said, remembering that I hadn't yet expressed my gratitude to him.

His eyes widened slightly at this show of thanks, and he flashed me a faint smile.

With that exchange alone, the scent of happiness grew even stronger.

Around ten days had passed since my arrival at Al's mansion.

Since I couldn't leave my room, I was occupying myself by studying the language used in the Kingdom of Palettia.

"I was right—your way of speaking *is* very similar to the archaic speech style in the Kingdom of Palettia. There might be some slight variations, but they're almost identical."

"Hmm? I see…"

Such were our conclusions while Al and I exchanged information during my study sessions.

"Acryl, are you suggesting that the Lycants have been speaking the same way for generations? If so, there's a possibility that your ancestors and mine were once part of the same tribe."

"Dost thou think so?"

"I can only speculate. But you should be able to read books and the like as well. I'll bring you some later."

"Books? Such rare items thou hast here…"

"Did the Lycants have books?"

"Hmm… Lycants rarely involve themselves with other tribes, but curious strangers come to visit us from time to time wishing to barter. Only the book-lovers and chiefs spend any time reading. I learned letters, so I know how to, but I care little for it."

"Only the chiefs and book-lovers…? Didn't you keep any records?"

"Records? The chiefs tell stories about the past. They leave our records in songs."

"So learning to write wasn't essential in Lycant society… But you know how to read, Acryl?"

"I remember most things once I've learned them."

"…Perhaps you're an unrecognized genius in that regard?"

"…? What's that?"

"No, nothing."

I enjoyed studying with Al, listening to stories about the Kingdom of Palettia, and talking about my life with the Lycants.

But one day…Al didn't stop by my room.

"Isn't he coming today?" I wondered aloud.

He usually didn't spend the entire day with me, only dropping by during mealtimes. If he wasn't busy, he would help me study, or tell me about this or that.

But if he didn't come see me, no one would bring me any food. What was I going to do? As it happened, the next meal after breakfast still hadn't come.

"Has something happened…?"

Since I had been staying in my room all this time, I had no idea what was going on outside.

Anxiety welled up inside me. If Al didn't return, I would be all alone again. That was bad enough by itself, but I feared I would end up slipping back into the episodes that still haunted my nightmares.

"…Hmm?"

Maybe because I was so worried, my senses were more delicate than usual, and I picked up a sound.

I listened carefully, trying to catch it. It sounded like someone talking a good distance away. It was no ordinary conversation; that much was certain.

"What's going on…?"

Aware that this was folly, I approached the door and nudged it open—and the voice sounded slightly louder. And angry.

I could also detect a scent wafting from far away—so familiar that I reeled back.

Blood…?!

Why could I smell blood? What was that voice? Had something bad happened to Al?

I couldn't stand that thought, and so I pushed the door wide open and bolted toward the voice.

It was near the main door into the mansion, in a large hall near the entrance. The stench was thick, and I heard someone urgently giving instructions. Then I spotted a familiar person painted in red lying atop the floor.

"Bring bandages, quickly! Help him! I'll clean the wound!"

At the injured man's side was Al, his expression grim as he issued sharp instructions.

The man was moaning in pain, but Al did his best to treat him, even letting his own clothes get stained with blood.

With a wave of Al's hand, water appeared from the air and washed away the dirt from the man's wounds. Even from a distance, it was clear that he would need a good many stitches.

But it was also clear that there weren't enough people here to properly treat him.

Do not they have a healer or doctor?

There were a great many injured people, and some could lose their lives if they didn't receive adequate treatment in time.

My breathing was growing ragged, so I tried desperately to catch my breath. I hadn't smelled real blood in so long, and the smell along with the presence of death looming nearby made my head spin.

No, this wasn't the hellhole where I had been held captive. There were wounded people here, people who needed help. But Al was shorthanded.

What could I possibly do?

"Al!" I called out from the second floor to everyone down on the first one, before placing my hand on the railing and jumping down to the floor below.

Al stared at me in disbelief.

Landing softly on the ground, I ran to his side.

"Acryl?! Why did you leave your room?!"

"We can talk later! These people need treatment, yes? I can help!"

"What?"

"Lycants are hunters! We learn how to treat injuries as children! Let me help!" I said, staring straight into his eyes.

Al looked back in surprise and confusion—but he didn't hold my gaze for long. The wounded man lying on his side groaned in pain, and Al turned away from me back to more urgent matters.

"…All right. Give me a hand, Acryl. We don't have enough people here to help everyone."

"I understand! How many injured are there? I shall start with the worst of them! I need needle and thread! If you have suturing tools, pass them to me!"

* * *

Borrowing the necessary tools from Al, I treated those in urgent need until I finally found a moment to catch my breath.

Fortunately, no one had lost life or limb. So long as they rested and did nothing to aggravate their wounds, they would soon be

able to return to their lives.

Once we were finished helping the wounded, Al led me back to my room. His brow was knit with worry.

"Acryl… I appreciate your help with the wounded. But why did you leave your room without permission?"

"…I'm sorry."

There could be no denying that I had broken my promise to him, and I was truly sorry about that.

"But there was a commotion, and I smelled blood… I feared something had happened to you…"

I understood well enough that it sounded like I was making excuses, which was why I was staring down at the floor. I couldn't tell how Al reacted to my words.

Plop.

I felt a hand being placed on my head. Al stroked my hair, but his expression was still dark. He wasn't accustomed to comforting people like this.

"I'm grateful. Still, I was worried things might end up worse for you if we didn't do a good job. No more rash actions, please."

"…I understand."

"That being said, this was a good opportunity. You helped with the injured, so hopefully fewer people will think of you as a danger. Maybe we won't need to keep you hidden in your room anymore."

"Oh? Are you certain?"

"Well, we can't keep you locked up forever. Besides…"

"Yes?"

"…Don't you have a home to go back to?"

My thoughts turned to the Lycant village. Of course I would like to go back there, if I could.

But I shook my head.

"I shall never forget your kindness," I said, staring straight at Al. "And I shall stay by your side until I've repaid my debt. I know not where the Lycant village is, and I have not strength enough to go looking for it."

"…I see," Al answered, before turning the subject back to the wounded. "Your Lycant first aid skills were certainly a sight to behold."

I nodded back. "We Lycants are a tribe of hunters, and protecting our territory from monsters has always been part of our lives. Any Lycant could have done as much."

“Oh…? Is that because your tribe lives in close proximity with monsters, maybe? In any case, you were a great help, Acryl.”

“If I may, how were those people hurt? They were attacked by monsters, yes?”

“They were sent to thin out the herds. This is a remote corner of the Kingdom of Palettia, and there aren’t always enough people here when it comes time to hunt. It isn’t unusual for people to get hurt like they did today.”

“…Hmm.”

Al had answered my first question, but it only raised another.

“Al?”

“What?”

“If warriors are lacking, why dost thou not fight alongside them?”

His clothes were spattered with bloodstains, but that was only from treating the wounded.

I couldn’t smell the outside on him. Which meant that he had left the fighting to the others while he had remained inside the mansion.

“And thou couldst have healed their wounds much faster if thou hadst lent them thy powers.”

“…My powers?”

“Why didst thou not make them part of your tribe?”

The vampires I had known would have done just that. Al might have had nothing to do with them, but he was still a vampire, after all.

So wouldn’t it be better to welcome others into his own tribe to reduce the number of unnecessary injuries? That seemed sensible to me, at least.

“Thou saidst none of my kin live in the Kingdom of Palettia, but if your people suffer, would it not be easier just to share thy powers with them…?”

“…Do you think I should just turn them all into vampires, Acryl?”

“The vampires I knew would have done, so I cannot fathom why thou wouldst not. Dost not thou worry for them?”

At this question, Al massaged his temples as if he had a headache. He remained silent for a moment before finally responding, “…Acryl, I told you to stay in your room so that you wouldn’t be mistaken for a monster, right? The reason I said that is

because in the Kingdom of Palettia, Lycants and vampires are considered monsters, too."

"But we are *not* monsters!"

"And what makes Lycants and vampires different from monsters?"

"What kind of a question is that…? They *are*…"

"*You* know the difference, Acryl. But there are no Lycants or vampires in the Kingdom of Palettia, and people don't know about them, either. Which is why there's a very real possibility we might be treated as monsters, or even killed."

"…I see."

I could think of no other response. If that was how things were, what could I do about it?

Al had pointed this out before, but I hadn't really understood the meaning behind his words. Because I couldn't comprehend what people in the Kingdom of Palettia considered normal.

"I'm certainly worried about them. In a way, it's my fault they've been forced into these roles. If I could help, I would very much like to. But I can't."

"That's not true. Thou'rt strong, Al. I can see it."

The way he carried himself, he looked wary of leaving any blind spots. He moved like a man who had trained physically, and his arms were quite muscular.

Al turned his gaze to me, the wrinkles between his eyebrows so tight that they looked impossible to remove. Finally, he let out a resigned sigh.

"…Are Lycants really so discerning?" he asked.

"Well, we are hunters. It is dangerous to live in the forest without keen skills of observation. If one cannot determine the difference between her own abilities and a monster's, she could lose her life. Thou'rt strong enough to fight; thine idleness here is most bewildering."

Al fell into a deep silence at this question.

I knew I had asked him something I shouldn't have. But I couldn't pretend not to have seen what I had.

Al had been doing his utmost to treat the wounded. He genuinely cared for them, and he had healed them to the best of his ability. So why hadn't he done more? He ought to have been able to.

I am not sure how long he waited to speak again.

“It’s not that I don’t *want* to do anything,” he finally answered after a long, long pause. “If I could take part in the expeditions to cull the monster herds, I probably could be of help to everyone. But I’m not allowed.”

“Not allowed?”

“I’m a criminal. I’m not allowed to set foot outside the mansion.”

Al spoke with a faraway look, as though he wasn’t completely here with me.

As I watched his profile, I imagined him disappearing as quickly as a fleeting, melting snowflake.

“What sort of crime?” I asked, reaching out and taking his hand.

“…I doubt it would sit well with you.”

“We don’t fully understand each other; thou saidst this was natural. But should we not try?”

I looked into his eyes as I asked this. Al glanced away for a moment, remaining silent—but perhaps because I still hadn’t let go of his hand, he finally surrendered.

He rubbed the back of his head with his free hand, let out a sigh, and answered, “I’m…a traitor.”

“A traitor?”

“A traitor to many. The expectations of my parents, the role and responsibilities given to me, the people I was supposed to protect. I betrayed my kingdom itself.”

“…Why?”

If this was the full story, this was a massive betrayal indeed.

But he didn’t seem like the kind of person to do all that, which was why I had to know.

He didn’t answer at first. Then, after a moment of silence, he said, “I…I hated it all.”

“…Al?”

“The Kingdom of Palettia, my father, my mother, the people, everything… I hated all of it.”

His words were heavy and quiet. His expression relaxed, although I could feel the cold sharp chill behind that facade.

I thought of a weak fire, which could be extinguished if the

wind chose to blow in. What state of mind did he have to be in back then to have said that? What emotion was in his eyes?

I didn't know. But still…

"…It's a burden, isn't it, Al?"

I could see that he was on the verge of tears. Yet he didn't cry—he simply stood there, apparently at a total loss.

It was like he had forgotten how to cry. Perhaps that was why I had imagined him disappearing before.

He was cold as snow and sharp as ice. But he was the sort of person who might fade away if touched. He was bitter, hard, and melancholy—and he seemed to have forgotten how to express all of it.

I couldn't leave him like this. My heart ached just watching him.

People can't live without warmth, but sometimes that warmth could be a fragile thing that shattered if you reached out. But I wanted to anyway.

"…What do you know, Acryl?" His words were especially cold and sharp. He must have heard what I'd said.

He had rejected me. He could easily shake me off.

And yet he didn't.

Instead, he gently placed his free hand above mine and pulled my fingers away. With that one gesture, I understood the kind of person he was.

He hated people, despised them, rejected them—and despite all that, I could feel his kindness as he shook off the warmth that I had offered him.

Ah, I was sure of it. Try as he might to keep people away by claiming to be full of hate, he didn't really want to reject anyone. But he tried to push them away because he believed he was a sinner.

"I don't know anything. But I want to know more about you."

Al's hand tried to untie our fingers, but I stopped him by placing my free hand on his.

We faced each other, our hands overlapping. He had expressed his intent to reject me, but I was expressing my hope to step closer to him.

"…Why do you want to know me?"

"Because I do."

"But why?"

“Because I want to understand thy pain.”

“What good would that do you?”

“I want to help.”

He visibly swallowed, turning away to hide his distorted expression.

This time, he succeeded in shaking my hand away, creating a new distance between us… But he was only one step away. And that could be overcome.

“…It’s none of your business.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“…So you admit it?”

“I know thou followest not thy heart. And if I wish to know thee more, if I wish to help thee—such things are for me to decide, no?”

“And I’m free to decide whether or not to accept your concern, don’t you think?”

“I shan’t compel thee to do anything… But if thou wouldst indulge me, I’d be most pleased.”

Until then, I would stay here for as long as I felt I should.

“I am becoming very interested in thee,” I said.

Everything was so fragile—he might disappear at any moment, and his warmth would be lost under terrifying coldness.

I wished to return his gift to me, to help him as much as I could—and to know more about him.

As these thoughts rushed through my mind, I stared at Al—and he looked back at me with astonishment. Finally, he let out a deep sigh, rubbed the wrinkles between his eyes, and muttered, “You know…what you said just then could invite misunderstanding?”

“Misunderstanding?”

“…I’m not the kind of man who would have romantic feelings toward a child. If you feel that way, stop now.”

Romantic feelings? It took me a moment to understand what he was even saying. The feelings that developed between a couple…?

Did I have such expectations of Al? When I finally realized, I couldn’t stop the heat rising to my cheeks.

“I—I—I’m…not a child! The misunderstanding is not mine!”

“…All right then. But you are a child.”

“Perhaps I am not yet fully grown, but I’m *hardly* a child!”

“The more you insist you aren’t, the more it sounds like you are.”

“I am *not*! Ugh! Al!”

I was so embarrassed that I tried to push him away, but he neatly sidestepped me.

“Do not flee, coward!”

“Then don’t push me.”

“Ugh… Al…! Y-you fool!”

Before I knew it, I tried to hit him again, but he easily dodged again, and so I started chasing him in indignation.

At the time, I wasn’t able to make out the expression on his face.

* * *

A good while had passed since the incident that had prompted me to first leave my room.

I was outside in the courtyard, hanging the laundry out to dry. When finally I was finished, I nodded in satisfaction as I watched the clothes swaying slightly in the wind.

“All right, that’s it!”

“Good work, Acryl. Thank you again,” said the old man doing the washing with me as he flashed me a smile.

I smiled back at him. This was my everyday life now.

A few days after I had first left my room, Al gave me permission to come outside. He had informed everyone else in the mansion of my presence and made it known that I was no danger to them.

The people in the mansion welcomed me with open arms, perhaps because I had left a good first impression by helping tend to their injuries.

However, they were all older men, so I was worried that they might treat me like a child. I had to insist that I was too old to be coddled.

Putting all that aside, once I was free to roam, I had a favor to ask Al—I wanted some duties here at the mansion.

Up until then, I had been a mere guest, eating food and contributing nothing in return. Al insisted that I didn't need to do anything, but I was uncomfortable just sitting idly by.

After all, he had saved my life and given me a place to live and food to eat. At the very least, I ought to repay him for all that.

So when finally I was permitted to help out, I dived straight into my tasks.

I was asked to clean the mansion, wash clothes, and help with the cooking. In the Kingdom of Palettia, these jobs were normally performed by people called "maids." But there were no maids in Al's mansion, so the men had been seeing to them all themselves.

That was where I came in. And thanks to this, my presence was welcomed by everyone.

Including Al, there were around twenty people living in the mansion.

Their usual routine was to train at the mansion, look after their own personal particulars, and patrol the forest in shifts. And whenever they found a pack of monsters that had grown too large, they set out to thin its numbers.

They had found a particularly large pack the last time around, which was how several of the men had ended up getting injured while trying to deal with them.

I had some opinions of my own about that, but I felt that I should gain everyone's trust before speaking my mind.

And now, I knew I had made the right decision. In fact, since starting to help out with work at the mansion, I had learned a great deal.

Al doesn't seem to interact with the others all that much…

That was one thing I'd noticed since I'd started mingling with everyone else here.

I seldom encountered Al at all when I was walking about the mansion. Not even the other people who lived there spoke about him.

Does that have something to do with his crimes…?

As I was wandering about the building thinking all this, an elderly man with a pure white head of hair approached from down the corridor.

"Ah, Acryl. Thank you for helping out with the laundry."

"Clive."

His name was Clive, and he was in charge of managing the mansion. Apart from Al, he was the only other person in the building with whom I spoke regularly.

Perhaps because of his age, he was gentle and soft-spoken. He often gave me tasks to see to, and so I had started talking with him fairly often.

"I'm about to start preparing lunch. Do you mind giving me a little help?"

"Not at all."

Until now, Clive had been doing most of the cooking alone. According to the others, he could do nearly anything, and life here would have been immensely more difficult without him.

So I wanted to get to know him more. If anyone could tell me the things that I wanted to know, I suspected it would be him.

Almost a full month had passed since I had started considering this plan.

Hmm… Maybe now would be a good time to ask…?

If he seemed reluctant to answer, I would give it more time. But for the time being, I decided to ask, "May I ask you a question, Clive?"

"What is it?"

"Who exactly is Al? He called himself a criminal," I asked as soon as our lunch preparations were complete.

Clive fell silent in response to this question. The only sound I heard was the clattering lid of the pot on the fire.

"…Miss Acryl," he began at last. "Do you have time to talk after lunch?"

"Does that mean I will learn the story?"

"Yes. You took longer to ask than I was expecting. I suspect you've been trying to get us all to lower our guard?"

"…You noticed?"

"I have a keen insight into people's thoughts and feelings. Though I have a great many years of experience to thank for that."

Well. I pouted. It was a bit disappointing to hear him say it so

easily.

Clive let out a small laugh. “But perhaps it’s precisely because you’ve been so careful in your approach to him that he’s finally opening his heart to you.”

“…Al is?”

“If you want to talk to me, I have permission to discuss it with you. Though it may be a long story,” Clive said, peering straight into my eyes.

Was I ready? That was what his gaze seemed to ask me, so I summoned up my resolve and gave him a firm nod.

* * *

We went up to my room, and Clive offered me a cup of tea before we started talking. He sat in front of me, sitting up tall on his chair.

“First, why don’t we start from Algard’s point of view?”

“Algard? Is that Al’s name?”

“Yes. His full name is Algard Von Palettia. He’s a prince of the Kingdom of Palettia.”

“…Al is a prince? Does that mean he is the king’s son?”

“Yes.”

So Al was a prince. I was both surprised and not.

His calm and collected demeanor certainly reminded me of a Lycant chief.

“He would have been the realm’s future king. Under normal circumstances, he would never have been sent to such a remote area as this. Did he tell you anything about why he’s here?”

“Only that he’s a traitor…”

“Yes. Master Algard committed a grave crime. Because of that, he was stripped of his birthright and ordered to remain here.”

“So he was supposed to lead his country, but now he can’t? What did he do? How bad was it?”

I still had little sense of the scale of a country, so it was hard to connect all this with my own common sense.

What crime did one have to commit to be stripped of authority and confined to a house? I couldn’t even imagine.

What, exactly, did he do? Why did he become a criminal?

Faced with these questions, Clive let out a heavy sigh before continuing, “Master Algard’s sin was that he tried to wrest control

of the country for himself."

"…He did?"

"Yes. From his father the king, his mother the queen, the nobility, the commoners, everyone."

"…Al did that?"

I couldn't fathom it. From the impressions I had had of him so far, it was hard to imagine him as that kind of person.

But I doubted that Clive was lying just now, either. Difficult to believe though it was, this was the true story of Al's crimes.

"Algard was involved in a wicked plot and nearly brought chaos and disorder to the Kingdom of Palettia. He was deemed unworthy to become king and banished to this far-off land."

"…"

"…You look incredulous, but I assure you, it's true."

"Why would he do such a thing?"

I understood the gravity of Al's crimes. But I was still curious about his reasoning. What had pushed him to take such extreme measures?

Clive paused there, reaching for his cup. He sipped his tea, then placed the cup soundlessly back on its saucer.

"Algard has an older sister," he said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Miss Acryl, do you know that immense importance is placed on magic in this country?"

"Yes. Al told me. It's called the power of spirits."

The Kingdom of Palettia was a country with advanced magic, and its people placed great importance on what we Lycants called the power of spirits.

Magic was apparently deeply intertwined with the country's origins, and nobles used powers inherited from their ancestors for the good of the kingdom and its people. That was why, I was told, they were awarded the privilege of nobility.

And the most powerful nobility was the royal family—the family that governed the country, starting with the first king who founded the kingdom.

"In this land, the ability to wield magic is considered a symbol of power and status, and the greater one's skill with it, the higher the honor they receive."

"Is Al's sister an excellent mage?"

"No, quite the opposite. She can't wield magic at all."

“Oh…?”

The situation was quite surprising indeed.

Clive smiled slightly at my reaction as he continued, “That was the core of the problem. His sister showed talent of a different kind to those around her.”

“How so…?”

“Algard’s sister is named Anisphia Wynn Palettia. She created tools allowing commoners to use magic.”

“Magic tools…?”

“Yes. With such tools, anyone can wield the kind of magic heretofore reserved for royalty and nobility. Even commoners.”

“…An incredible feat.”

Lycants also had the power of spirits within them, but that didn’t mean we could use magic like people in the Kingdom of Palettia. Our spirit powers revolved around enhancing our bodily strength.

According to Al, that was similar to what mages called physically enhancing magic.

So even I could understand how great an achievement it was, making tools that could let anyone use magic.

“In this country, male heirs are preferred for the throne. Essentially, it would have been impossible for Princess Anisphia, with her inability to wield magic, to become queen. However, she went on to develop unprecedented technologies that had a tremendous impact on the whole country.”

“What an amazing girl…”

“Yes, she’s a remarkable individual… So great, in fact, that some advocated that she become the next ruler instead of Algard.”

“…Would it be permitted?”

“No. Some wanted it, though Princess Anisphia herself didn’t. However, her influence couldn’t be disregarded, and so Algard made up his mind…”

“Because of his sister’s influence, Algard tried to become king by force…?”

If that was the case, I could certainly imagine it happening.

Originally, the right to become king was his. It wasn’t terribly surprising for someone on the verge of losing it to resort to force…

“There are several other small albeit important details, but they might seem somewhat convoluted to one who didn’t grow up in this land. In any event, we can discuss those later… Back to what

happened—it was Princess Anisphia who brought an end to Master Algard's heinous betrayal of his country."

"…So you're saying his sister, this Anisphia, is the one who made him suffer?"

A princess unable to use magic, who would ordinarily have been disqualified from becoming queen. A disruptor who developed tools that granted those magical abilities to everyone.

And the person who had pushed Al, originally destined to become king, to the wayside.

Just thinking about the anguish she had caused him, I could feel hateful thoughts about her rising in me.

But Clive shook his head sadly. "Princess Anisphia never wanted to torment Master Algard. In her own way, she was concerned about his well-being. Unfortunately…well, it came down to the adults surrounding them both."

"Adults?"

"Because of their superior status, nobles are permitted certain extravagances. And once someone knows extravagance, they want even more of it. For a noble, that can mean wealth surpassing all other nobles—and if they go too far, it can mean wanting to become king themselves. There were those who tried to use Master Algard to their own advantage."

My eyes widened in disbelief at what Clive had just revealed to me.

There were people who tried to use Al for *luxury*?

"But…! I understand nobles enjoy all kinds of luxuries—but is that not because they are responsible for looking after others?"

"Indeed. You're most correct, Miss Acryl. It was those adults who failed to understand that fundamental truth who ruined the relationship between Master Algard and Princess Anisphia."

I felt a chill run down my spine. Clive's expression was as sharp as a sword edge, and his fists were shaking with visible anger.

"They were so close as children, Master Algard and Princess Anisphia. But Master Algard was considered to be of little talent, while Anisphia, creating things that people had never even seen before, kept winning praise out of public view." Clive let out a deep exhale, shaking his head. "But Princess Anisphia's value was unacceptable to the nobles who rule the Kingdom of Palettia. And so there were those who sought to pit them against each other. I'm referring, of course, to those nobles who sought to expand their

privileges."

"…So the people around him made Al hate his sister?"

Clive nodded in quiet response.

I slammed my hands down on the desk, sending the teacup bouncing with a loud clatter. "It isn't his fault!" I cried out. "He never wanted to be in conflict with his sister! It's *their* fault, so how dare they call *him* a criminal?!"

If the old butler's story was true, it meant that the adults around Al had tried to take advantage of him in the pursuit of greater luxury. It was unbelievable.

I couldn't understand why they would do that—I didn't *want* to understand. I could feel my eyes burning with rage.

Clive looked back at me with a sad smile. The anger that had flared up inside me began to slowly abate.

"Yes, you are exactly right, Miss Acryl," he said. "It wasn't only Master Algard at fault, was it? A great many were responsible, and they each erred in their own ways. But even so."

"…Al's still a criminal?"

"Yes. Because he is royalty, and that is a position of high responsibility. Of course, those whose blind ambition led them astray have been punished accordingly, but for allowing himself to be misled, Master Algard is likewise guilty. And he is royalty, so he cannot be easily forgiven…"

"So he was always compared with his sister, treated as a disappointment, then used by others? And *he* is the one at fault? Because his sister had talent and he didn't? Surely not! What of the adults around him?! Who was it who made him that way?!"

"…I can't argue with you. We should all have been more supportive to keep him on the right path. Which is why, Miss Acryl…"

"…Which is why what…?"

"Please remain by Master Algard's side."

"By his side…?"

"You are not a citizen of this country. You are not one of those he is sworn to protect, nor does he need to live up to any high position or title when he is with you. You are a guest to him, and you could be a friend. That is what he needs most now."

There was a tremor in the old butler's voice, a weight of emotion lying beneath the surface.

I caught my breath at the seriousness in his voice. I owed it to

him and Al to respond in kind.

"Your burden is heavy, too, Clive. But I know not if I can fulfill that request. I ought to discuss it with Al. I know the truth, but not how he feels. To be honest, I am not certain I can do anything."

"I won't insist. I know it's a selfish request."

"Selfish…? Does Al not wish to be saved?"

"…Well…"

"If not, I doubt my words have any power."

"…Indeed," Clive murmured forlornly.

From my point of view, everyone was being selfish—those who treated Al as a criminal, and those turning to me to help him.

"Clive. I can see your regret is heartfelt, as is your desire to save Al. But his pain will persist. You cannot erase it, nor should you. If Al wishes to be saved, he needs to say it himself. Only then shall I help him. I shan't meddle otherwise."

No matter what those around him said, he had to make the final decision himself.

It had to be Al who made the choice. And it had to be he who decided how to respond to everyone's concern.

"Perhaps he never had anyone he could confide in before," I said.

"…That may be true," Clive answered.

"I can't say I'm worthy of the task, but I'll listen if he wants to talk. Not because you asked me to. Because I want to know for myself, about Al's thoughts and feelings."

"Miss Acryl…"

"I can only save someone who wishes to be saved."

That was the truth. No matter how others fretted or worried, his heart and life belonged to him.

If he didn't want to take anyone's outstretched hand, that would be it. I had no intention of forcing him to do anything against his will.

"That's all right. No, that's probably for the best. Please hold on to your convictions, Miss Acryl. And I will watch over him. This time…" With those words, Clive rose to his feet and offered me a deep bow. "Please remain near him, Miss Acryl."

"…I shall, but not because of your request."

Having said that, I picked up my teacup. The beverage had turned cold, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

* * *

I couldn't sit still after everything Clive had told me, and so I found myself heading for Al's room.

Night had fallen outside, and I could see the moon and stars twinkling through the window. Nonetheless, I could sense that the person inside was still awake, so I knocked on the door.

A few moments later, it swung open. Al stepped out to look at me.

"…Acryl?"

"Good evening. May I have a minute?"

"…Come in," he said, ushering me inside with no further questions.

His room was remarkably plain. There was a bed, a rocking chair, and a table. Those were the only items that stood out. It was so lifeless that I felt a cold chill fall over me.

"…Is that chair too big for you?" he asked.

"I'm not small."

"I didn't say you were. All right. Sit on the bed, then," he said.

We both sat on the edge of the bed, with enough space between us to fit two people.

"…If you're here, I suppose that means you spoke to Clive?" Al began.

"Yes…"

"I see… Did it all come as a surprise?"

"Huh?"

"I've been keeping a great deal from you. I probably ought to have told you myself. But I didn't have the confidence to explain it all with a level head. You didn't ask me directly, either, so I left it to Clive to explain."

"…I believed you did not wish to be asked."

"And yet that didn't stop you from trying to find out."

"…Have I angered you?"

"A little, at first. But it *was* rather like you not to try asking me directly."

Al closed his eyes, staring up at the ceiling as though something was on his mind.

He was so calm and quiet that I wondered if he might turn invisible and disappear. I couldn't afford to let him out of my sight.

“I thought it would be good if you knew. I didn’t even think it through properly. *Why* did I want you to know? I suppose I just wanted you to see the real me.”

“Oh?”

“I couldn’t just be Al before. I was Algard Von Palettia, the kingdom’s prince and future ruler. And I’m a criminal who threw it all away,” he said flatly, his voice dry and devoid of emotion.

His eyes were mostly closed, but I could still see the emotion in them. The slight lift to the corner of his mouth likewise hinted at his complexity of feeling.

He didn’t speak those thoughts out loud, but his expression made them clear enough. It was like he was unstable inside, broken.

I was sure he wanted to hide his true feelings, but it was equally true that he couldn’t. Like he said, not even he knew what he really wanted.

“…I was frantic and desperate when we were putting the plan together.”

“To take control of the country, you mean?”

“Yes. I thought it was a wonderful plot. Because I’d been suffering for so long. So long.”

At last, word by word, he began to pour out his thoughts.

“Everyone always had these expectations of me, and I was never able to meet them. I only received charity in some form or another. Like I was just an empty vessel. People only ever saw me from behind as they threw things at me. I guess it was love, of a kind. Status, riches, betrothal.”

“…Betrothal?”

“Hmm? Ah, Clive didn’t tell you? Every prince is supposed to have a betrothed.”

I had learned that word during my studies. That was someone whom he was supposed to marry one day in the future.

…Huh. What was this feeling that came over me just now? Frustration? Queasiness?

“Our relationship wasn’t one that allowed us to feel comfortable around one another, though.”

“…Oh? But you were meant to be future partners.”

“*I* was far from distinguished. No, I wasn’t any good, so my father and her father were anxious to partner us together before I took on the task of managing the country. *She* was always extremely capable.”

“Was she a great person, the woman?”

“She was perfect. There was no comparison between the two of us. Her only flaw was that she wasn’t very affectionate. Which was why I hated her so much.”

“You hated her?”

“She was far too good for me. Who was our engagement even for? With her, I would just be an accessory. So I treated her poorly. No matter how much I might have hated her, I regret doing that.”

“…So you did hold some affection for her?”

“That was impossible. At best, we might have been friends. I wouldn’t want her as my partner in life.”

As he spoke, Al’s dark smile turned to something gentler. He closed his eyes, apparently recalling warmer memories.

He didn’t like her, not in that way. But he did believe that they might have been friends. Just not companions.

However, if they were forced into such a relationship against their will…

“…It failed, did it not?”

“Oh. Yes. A lot happened,” Al said, his voice betraying his mixed feelings.

They had been completely at odds. And yet the situation that they had been forced into continued to unravel in a way that couldn’t be stitched back together.

“I wish I could have just accepted it all. Think nothing, feel nothing, just let it all go and be happy. That was what I needed. And yet I had so many doubts.”

“…But it was impossible.”

“No… I was blinded by *her*.”

“Who?”

“My sister.”

My heart seemed to skip a beat as Al uttered those words.

His older sister, Anisphia Wynn Palettia—he couldn’t possibly ignore her.

I was so surprised to hear Al bring her up that I became naturally defensive.

Yet I was even more taken aback by his response—his expression was calmer than I had ever seen before.

Almost as if he had taken out something precious to him so he could fondly inspect it.

“I…I guess I’ve always admired her…”

“Your sister…?”

“Yes. My earliest memories are of letting her drag me into mischief. I remember them so well. Every time we got scolded. All the trouble we got into. It was fun… And it felt so natural, following her around.”

“Al…”

“That was probably when I could most be myself… And it was probably when I was happiest.”

Al closed his eyes, seemingly chewing over his thoughts. I lent him a hand, hoping to calm his concerns.

“But she pushed me away. Looking back, I don’t suppose she had much choice. If I was to become king one day, she would only be a hindrance. That was what she thought, too. But I could never reach out to her the way I wanted to.”

His voice was now filled with deep regret. I wanted to shout back, but I couldn’t find the words.

These were his truest feelings, the ones that he couldn’t mend or hide—and that was why they resonated with me so painfully.

“In the end, I betrayed my family. My duties. Everything. What am I if not a sinner? I’m nothing now. I don’t deserve forgiveness.”

“That’s not true!”

This time, my thoughts poured out of my mouth.

All of a sudden, Al’s astonished face blurred. Wiping away my tears, I let my thoughts flow out of me. “No one who is empty would worry so much about his own flaws. You are hardly nothing, Al. Your doubts and fears were difficult to voice, nothing more.”

“…Why are you crying, Acryl?” he asked.

“Because it’s just so beautiful.”

“What?”

“Your heart. It’s beautiful, Al. I am glad to have met someone as beautiful as you.”

“…I don’t follow. How can you feel that way after everything I’ve told you?” he asked, looking genuinely confused.

I smiled back at him. I had never felt so calm before. My expression right now probably didn’t make much sense from where he was sitting.

“I doubt I can put it into words.”

“What…?”

“I simply thought so. And that’s enough… Do you not agree, Al?” I asked with a smile, still unable to stop the tears from spilling down my cheeks.

I couldn’t put it into words, but this was why I felt this way. I had found his inner truth.

“Who did you wish to be, Al?”

With that single question, his composure crumbled.

He sat there silently, then raised his hands to his chest as his face warped with pain. Everything that had built up inside him was struggling to come out.

“…I…”

He was trying to withstand the pain, but too many uncontrollable thoughts were rising to the surface.

I moved closer to him and reached out, placing a hand on his clenched jaw. “Do not torment yourself so,” I whispered. “No need to say it aloud. Your thoughts are yours alone. Even if we could put them into words, they would fail to reveal their depth and breadth. But they give me a reason to stay, and they are your truth.”

“…My truth?” Al muttered, holding on to the comfort that I had given him.

He paused, then placed his hand over mine, still scratching his cheek. “I…,” he began.

“Yes.”

“…I wanted to be the kind of person who could walk by my sister’s side.”

As he murmured his heartfelt wish, tears spilled from his eyes—beautiful tears.

“With her, I didn’t have any dreams or ideals. I didn’t have to have the strength to achieve anything by myself. I was just living… and she taught me how wonderful that was.”

Try as he might to keep his voice steady, he couldn’t hide a faint tremor. Right now, his heart was wavering, too.

“She showed me such a wonderful dream. She showed me that you don’t have to use magic if you don’t have talent! If I had been born without it, I would have been just like her! I would have been able to stay with her! But she left, all because of this mediocre

talent that has never done anything for me! The only thing that came of it was her abandoning me! If that was all it amounted to…I didn't want it. All I ever wanted, all I ever really wanted… I just admired her dreams! That's all…"

With that, Al's expression became more befitting his age—frustrated and sad. His whole body shook with the weight of his emotions.

"…If it meant hurting her, I didn't want to be king…"

"You wanted to support her dreams, didn't you, Al?"

"Yes… Yes, you're right. That's what I wanted. To support her," he muttered in realization.

I couldn't stand watching this fragile young man weighing up his own thoughts. Before I knew it, I had wrapped my arms around him to hold him tightly.

"Acryl…?"

"It's all right to cry. Why have you held these tears inside you all this time? Why?"

To me, Al was a lost child who had finally found himself after considering himself empty all this time.

I understood his fear, his loneliness, his sorrow of wandering with nowhere to turn.

And his heart had been wandering for so very long. When I thought of the unbearable pain he had endured, I couldn't help holding him close.

"It is all here within you. All the important things. Your heart, everything you desired, everything you truly cherished… And they are all so beautiful."

"…Ah…I…I see…," he finally murmured, before gently leaning into me.

We stayed that way for a long while, neither of us uttering a word, until at last our feelings calmed.

* * *

Afterward, the days passed without incident—until Al's sister, Anisphia Wynn Palettia, arrived at the mansion on her visit.

Ah, yes. I could see the resemblance. One look at her face made it clear that they were kin.

That was all. But I just couldn't think well of her. Despite her

resemblance to Al, her appearance stirred some anger within me.

Al had been hurt so badly that he had lost himself—so why did *she* have to look somehow wounded, too?

I didn't want to ignore her feelings, but she seemed so afraid of speaking up or reaching out. It was infuriating. Even when she spoke with Al, she never tried to bridge the distance between them.

"…So that's how Acryl came to be staying here at the mansion."

I was so wrapped up in my own emotions that I had missed Al's detailed explanation.

But he was only going over the circumstances of my arrival, so I doubted I had missed anything.

"I see… So that's how it is. Um, Acryl?"

After hearing her brother out, Anisphia turned to me.

Even that action was vexing. Why was she looking at me? Did she not have more important matters to attend to? Why was she not meeting Al's eyes?

If she had something to say, she should say it. She ought to be more concerned about her brother sitting right in front of her, shouldn't she? The thoughts were whirling around and around in my head.

"Speak not to me," I answered.

"Eh?"

"I dislike you."

Anisphia stared back with surprise and bewilderment at my evaluation.

Her gestures and expressions were in some way similar to Al's—which was why I couldn't keep my indignation in check.

"I am not the object of your concern. Should you not face someone else?"

I couldn't comprehend her. And I was sure that I would not for a long, long time to come.

She was Al's only sister. She ought to be the one who knew him best, who accepted him most—his thoughts, his wishes, his cherished dreams.

CHAPTER 8

Dazed, I stared up at the unfamiliar ceiling in the guest room at Allie's mansion, where I was staying with Euphie.

During the course of our reunion, he had told me how Acryl had come to stay at the mansion. I had tried speaking to her myself, but she wouldn't have anything to do with me.

Because of that, I had lost my enthusiasm for talking to anyone, and I'd retreated to my room to catch my breath…

"…Ah…"

"Are you all right, Anis?" Euphie asked.

"You don't need to worry about me. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure…?" She stared back, one eyebrow raised as though she had more to say.

No doubt she had some thoughts of her own about Acryl's attitude. Her utter rejection had been quite impressive.

Thanks to Allie's intervention, nothing had happened—but if left to our own devices, we very well might have ended up in a fight.

Her attitude had been so disrespectful, in fact, she could have been arrested then and there.

However, she was absolved, seeing as she wasn't a citizen of the Kingdom of Palettia but a Lycant with a different sense of social norms.

Yet that didn't excuse her rudeness to me. Ilia, Garkie, and Halphys all seemed extremely wary of her, too.

Lainie, Navre, and Euphie, on the other hand, seemed rather puzzled by her.

"…Her demeanor aside, she isn't exactly wrong."

She wasn't the person I ought to be facing right now. She had simply bared her emotions and thrown them at me. I couldn't possibly refute her.

After all, I was well aware that I still had no idea how to deal with Allie.

"…I brought you here because of what happened with Caindeau," Euphie said all of a sudden.

I had suspected as much.

“So you *were* worried about me?” I remarked.

“…Yes.”

Ostensibly, Euphie’s reason for visiting the frontier was as part of her official inspection tour.

But what she really wanted was to create a pretext for me to reunite with Allie, just as she had been able to reconnect with her own brother.

“No one could have expected to meet Acryl here. So you don’t need to worry about me, Euphie.”

“Do you think so…?”

“If anything, it’s rather refreshing, meeting someone who hates me so much.”

“Refreshing… Really?”

“There have been plenty of people who hate me, but most of them won’t actually say it to my face.”

Back when people had called me Princess Peculiar, many individuals had looked on me with contempt. But they wouldn’t have dared put those thoughts into words. At best, they would be extremely circuitous about it.

“I knew that getting into an argument with them would only hurt my reputation, and it wasn’t like snapping at them would have changed anything. There’s a huge difference between interacting with someone who will tell you they don’t like you to your face and someone who won’t. But it’s hard to really put into words how it makes you feel…”

Maybe that was why I didn’t really mind Acryl’s attitude. In fact, my view of her wasn’t entirely unfavorable.

“Well, it still hurts hearing someone say it… Even more so when you know you’re to blame for it…”

Euphie’s expression was unreadable—I’m sure she was thinking about my inability to face Allie. But Acryl was right.

No matter what anyone else said or did, nothing would change unless Allie and I settled our differences. I knew that, so why couldn’t I bring myself to do anything?

“…Have I made a mess of things?” Euphie asked in a small voice.

The next moment, she covered her mouth with her hands, as though realizing she shouldn’t have asked that question.

But I knew why she had. So I responded with a wan smile. “No. It’s my fault I wasn’t ready for this. Even if you set the events in

motion, you're not the one to blame, Euphie."

"…"

"I just don't know how I should act or what I should do around him."

I had no idea whatsoever how to face him. What kind of relationship did I want with him? What kind of relationship could I *expect* from him? I didn't have the faintest clue.

Instead, I was just filling with anxiety, unable to define anything for myself at all.

"…I'm scared," I whispered.

"Of what?"

"Of hurting him again."

I felt like I had prioritized my own needs and thrown Allie to the wayside in the process.

It wasn't that I didn't care about him, but everything I had done had amounted to nothing—it had the exact opposite effect of what I had desired.

But even knowing how it had all ended, I couldn't not be who I was. Maybe I could have done something more for him, but I couldn't bring myself to change my own core.

"I couldn't give up on magic. Not even for him."

"…Anis…"

"All the excuses in the world won't change the fact that I turned a blind eye. If he thinks that means I abandoned him, I won't be able to deny it."

I hung my head, gently squeezing my hands into fists. They were trembling ever so slightly.

"…I *want* to face him. But I'm scared of hurting him again when I do. Of hurting myself. Of ruining everything all over again."

As I put all these uneasy, incomprehensible feelings into words, they began to make some semblance of sense. In the end, I was just scared that Allie and I would end up hurting each other once more. As much as I wanted to prevent that from happening, I wasn't confident that I could stop it.

"…Argh, I'm so pathetic!" I cried, slapping myself across the cheeks.

Some things were scary, and there was nothing to be done about them. But you couldn't solve anything until you stopped running away.

And Allie, at least, could be trusted. I had to remember that

reconciliation handshake he had offered me before we parted ways.

I had to keep moving forward. This endless brooding wouldn't change anything.

"Euphie," I said.

"Yes?"

"I'll be back. I'm going to see him."

"…See you soon," she said with a soft smile, kissing me lightly on the forehead to cheer me up.

It tickled a little, and her warmth brought a smile to my face. And so I made up my mind to leave the room.

Maybe I should look for Clive first? I don't know where Allie's room even is.

With that thought in mind, I started wandering through the mansion in search of the elderly butler.

But before I could find him, I stumbled on a certain someone.

Maybe it was coincidence, or maybe it was fate—but that someone was exactly the one I'd hoped to meet.

"Allie?"

"Sister?"

We each startled at the sudden encounter.

I had steeled myself to meet him, but still I wasn't ready for it.

Meanwhile, Allie seemed to have the same reaction. We froze, while the seconds ticked by around us.

"…U-um, Allie!"

Unable to endure the silence any longer, I summoned up my strength and said his name—and that seemed to help him unfreeze, too.

"…Sister. What are you doing outside your room?"

"I…er…"

My lips trembled at the thought of speaking my mind. Why did it take so much energy just to speak? It was unbearably frustrating.

Allie simply waited patiently for his cowardly sister to find her words. I really was pathetic, losing my voice right when I ought to be taking the plunge!

Finally, I just came out and said it.

"I wanted to talk to you, Allie!"

My voice was louder than I had intended, but at least I had been able to say what was on my mind.

Glancing timidly at his face, I found him watching me with consternation.

"…Ah," he said at last. "You really haven't changed, have you?"

"Ugh…"

"…You're just like I remember." He smiled, relaxing.

His words were gentle and calming.

"…Come with me, Sister."

"…All right."

I followed by his side as he led me to the mansion's courtyard.

The moon was more than bright enough for me to make out the surrounding scenery.

The garden was hardly grand, seemingly having received only a minimum of maintenance. Nonetheless, there were wildflowers in bloom in the center of it all. As chaotic as the sight was, I could feel the power of nature lying behind it.

"…How is life here?" I asked as we made our way slowly through the courtyard.

It was probably too simple a question, but Allie answered me normally. "Slow. I don't have any particular role to play, and there's nothing I have to be involved in here. It's what I need right now."

"…I see."

"In a way, it isn't much different from the life you used to have, wouldn't you say?"

"…Now that you put it that way, I suppose it isn't."

"The frontier and the detached palace are obviously very different, but talking to you here, I realize now just how similar they really are."

"Isn't it hard, being here?"

"No, not at all."

Allie came to a sudden stop. Ahead of him was a flowerbed in full bloom.

He kneeled down, reaching out his hand to gently stroke the petals. I couldn't make out his face fully.

"How are you doing, Sister?"

"Me?"

"I was surprised when I heard that Euphyllia had become queen, but it did make perfect sense. She kept her promise to me, didn't she?"

"Hold on. What promise?"

"I asked her to take care of you. That's all."

"…When did that happen?"

"Oh, you know. So how about it? Is your life comfortable

now?”

“…I suppose I’ve got more room to breathe.”

“I see.”

Allie let go of the flowers and rose to his feet. In his hand, he held a single blossom.

Then, for some reason, he placed the flower over my ear. It was so sudden that I had no time to react.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“I just thought it would look good on you.”

“Oh…?”

“I wanted to put it there, and then I did, without another thought. I could never have done that before.”

His hand was moving away. I studied his face again, illuminated in the moonlight.

He had grown since our last meeting. Something about his features and expression seemed more mature, and I realized I was staring.

On top of that, I could sense a calmness and composure in him that I hadn’t noticed before. There was a twinge in my chest.

“…There are certain things you don’t realize until you can see someone again.”

“Allie…?”

“I’m glad to see you’re doing well. It looks like I needn’t have been so worried.”

“…What are you talking about?”

“When Euphyllia became queen, I worried there might be a dispute over her accession to the throne.”

“There was. It was so, *so* hard. And things are probably going to be even more difficult from now on.”

“You’re probably right.”

As we spoke, my words began to flow easier.

And so we started exchanging thoughts—questions and answers, back and forth, back and forth.

“It’s hard to believe we’re talking so easily now,” Allie remarked.

“…It is, isn’t it?”

“…I’m sorry, Sister.”

“Huh?”

“…Would you laugh if I told you I regret my actions now…?” Allie asked, staring into my eyes.

I looked back, unable to respond.

Amid that silence, the wind picked up in intensity, rustling over the flowers that Allie had reached down to earlier.

"…I won't laugh," I answered. "I couldn't possibly."

"I see… It's far too late now, but when I saw you, I realized it clearly." Allie stared up at the moon overhead. "Maybe… Maybe, at the time, I just didn't want to understand."

"…Why not?"

"Because I felt like I was going to be crushed under the weight of all the terrible things I'd done. I couldn't muster the resolve to bear that weight. But seeing you now, I'm ready," he said forlornly, still watching the distant sky. "I always knew that you distanced yourself from me and intentionally damaged your own reputation so I could succeed as heir to the throne."

"…But I abandoned you, Allie. I kept on chasing after magic until I had produced tremendous results. That affected your reputation. It's all my fault."

"…Did you mean to abandon me, Sister?"

I sucked in a breath at that. It was too direct, leaving me unsure how to answer. I grabbed my chest in an effort to calm my racing heart.

"…I did. I couldn't think of anything to help you. Nothing."

"There's a difference between making the choice from the beginning and making the choice because there wasn't another one. Were you pleased by my downfall?"

"…Do I *look* pleased?!"

There was no need for me to shout out here, but my voice came out raspy and loud.

Of course I wasn't happy to see Allie banished to the frontier. I had never wanted him to become a vampire, the direct cause of his exile in the first place.

No, I hadn't wanted any of that. But excuses wouldn't change what I had done or lessen the burden of my guilt.

"Then I'm glad."

Yet Allie's smile was a peaceful one—one of relief.

"You were fighting, too. You wanted to get your hands on magic, didn't you? I understand how badly you wanted to be able to use it."

"Allie… But I…!"

"I know. I know. We couldn't help each other. Do you think we

could have made everything work if we hadn't had our falling-out? Somehow, I doubt it," he muttered with a gentle smile, closing his eyes in regret.

The two of us were standing right next to each other—yet for some reason, he felt very far away.

"No. Now that I think about it, things probably wouldn't have ended well even if we hadn't fallen out. If I had tried helping you achieve your dreams, you could have been assassinated. There was no way the nobles would have let you rise to the top."

"Maybe, but still…"

"Or perhaps there *might* have been a way, with Duke Magenta's help. If you and Euphyllia had met sooner and worked together. That could have led to an ideal outcome. Looking back, I would have chosen that future… But there's always clarity in hindsight. What's done is done."

Allie glanced down at his hand, slowly closing his eyes as he clutched it softly.

"I always thought you had betrayed me and cast me aside. And I was preoccupied with the responsibility of one day being king, the corruption plaguing the nobility, the distorted face of our society… I'm not trying to make excuses. I just wasn't strong enough not to let it warp me, too."

"You couldn't help it," I insisted. "Besides, I ended up distorting society myself."

"I still think the kingdom needs something to straighten it all out. So I don't think you're wrong. No, it was my methods that were the wrong choice."

Slowly, Allie opened his eyes and glanced down at his fists. They were clenched so tightly that I feared he might end up injuring himself.

"Even if I hadn't met Lainie and became king just as everyone planned, I still would have had to address all those problems. The afflictions of the Kingdom of Palettia were terminal. Without a drastic reshaping, the realm would have rotted away until its eventual destruction."

"…Allie. What *did* you want to do with Lainie's vampire powers?"

That was the question that I had wanted so desperately to ask him, but I hadn't been able to work up the courage. I wanted to hear it straight from his own mouth.

He fell silent. After a long pause, he finally said, “I would have suppressed the major nobles and established a dictatorship of sorts. Then I would have seized control of the political sphere and brought about a complete overhaul of the corrupted aristocracy… And then…”

He paused for a moment. Then softly, he added, “…I would have called you back. If I was going to reform the kingdom and reduce the influence of the nobility, that would inevitably require raising the status of commoners. Your magical tools were always the most effective means to that end. So after seizing control of the country, I planned to bring you in to help reform it. After that…”

“…Then what?”

“…Once my reforms had advanced far enough and the nobles were no longer needed…I would have eliminated everyone who knew the truth, myself included. I’d have left everything to you.”

I caught my breath at this, raising my hand to my chest as my heart turned to ice.

“…Allie? Didn’t you hate me?” I asked. A shiver ran through my whole body.

“I did. I hated you utterly. I always asked myself why you abandoned me. And then you kept on getting in my way. So yes,” he said, shaking his head as a calm expression fell over his face. “But that hatred I had for you was also directed at me and my own weakness. And at the nobles, even the kingdom itself, for dragging you away from me and refusing to recognize your potential.”

“Allie…”

“So I thought it would be best just to destroy it all. And to let you build it anew, you who were denied more than anyone else… If I did that, I thought you might instead be *freer* than anyone else…”

I was unable to respond to this confession.

He had told me how he felt about me once again. But how should I respond?

Allie flashed me an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry. Really.”

“…Why are you apologizing?”

“I was blinded by hatred. Now that I think about it, there was an obvious path for me that wouldn’t have meant relying on vampire powers… If I had asked Euphyllia, I know she would have helped. It’s just as you said. In the end, I only measured her worth by her power as a mage and her status as the daughter of a duke.”

“…Yes, Euphie’s amazing. She even catches me by surprise

sometimes…”

“You’re right… Say, Sister?”

“What…?”

“I wanted to be like Euphyllia. The woman she is now—that’s what *I* wanted to be as king.”

Allie gazed at me sadly, and there was something distant in his eyes. It was like we were separated by an impossible gulf.

“…I wanted to be a king who could help you.”

“…Ah…” My voice was tight.

The silence between us was so great that the sound of the wind was almost painful.

“Sister. If I had asked you for your help before I started making my plans, if I had told you how much I wanted to help you achieve your dreams…could I have walked the same path you do now?”

My vision blurred. When I realized that I was crying, I raised my hand to brush away the tears. But no matter how many times I wiped them away, everything was getting blurry, and I could hardly breathe.

What if Allie *had* asked me for help before everything that had happened?

My heart knew the answer, but I couldn’t put it into words.

I felt bitter, frustrated, sad, and helpless. This would be so much easier if I could just break down right here.

“I would have helped you! If you had asked me, I would have helped you!”

It was cowardly of me to raise my voice here. The more I tried to steady the shaking in my voice, the louder it got.

I couldn’t see anything now through my tears. I found it hard to breathe without holding my shoulders, and squeezing my eyes shut was doing nothing.

Ah. Of course, I knew the answer to that question even before he asked it.

After all, Allie was my little brother.

“I see… Yes, I see…,” he answered calmly.

I wiped away my tears and opened my eyes.

He was smiling gently—I think he was happy, truly happy, to have heard my response.

“Just hearing you say that is enough. I’m fine, Sister.”

“Allie…”

“I’m sorry I was such a stupid brother. I’m a fool for taking the long way around—the wrong path around—before I could realize it. But you came all this way for someone like me. What more could I ask for?”

“…But…I was the one…who abandoned you… *I* was the one who started all this…!”

“That’s not true. You didn’t abandon me. We’ve both been able to move on since that day, I’m sure. You used to think your only option was to keep your distance from me, and I was convinced that I had been rejected, losing sight of what I cared about most.”

Allie placed a hand on my shoulder.

I had been unable to gauge the distance between the two of us for so long now. We had both lost sight of each other.

Now that distance had shrunk a bit. The gulf that had grown between us was fading away.

“I remember saying to you that it’s hard not being who you want to be.”

“Yes…”

“It’s only natural I couldn’t pull it off. After all, I lost sight of who I wanted to be in the first place.”

“Yes…”

“Which is why *you’re* so incredible, Sister. You’ve made it so far. How many people now are cheering on your dreams? You reached out to them. People are looking to you to build a bright new future. To them, you’re like a beautiful star glittering in the night.”

“Allie…!”

“I want to congratulate you on achieving your dreams and wishes… I’ve been wanting to say that for a long, long time.”

My heart skipped a beat at Allie’s calm voice.

But I couldn’t keep on crying forever. And so I rubbed my eyes to wipe away the tears, looking straight back at him. “…Hee-hee-hee! I *am* amazing, aren’t I?”

“…You are.”

“It took forever, and I went down so many detours. But I made it. People had been denying me for so long, but little by little, they’ve started to accept me.”

“Yeah.”

“And I met someone I’ll cherish for the rest of my life.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m happy, Allie.”

Don’t let the tears flow.

Don’t let your voice quiver.

Please, don’t stop my message from reaching him.

“But I will continue pursuing my dreams. My goal is still a long way off, and I can’t reach it by myself. But now Euphie and many others are supporting me. I won’t give up. I’ll keep on marching forward.”

I took a deep breath, steadying my shaking as I wiped away the last of my tears and looked Allie squarely in the eye.

“They aren’t just my dreams anymore. What do you think, Allie? Do you still want to share them with me?”

“…Sister.”

“No matter how far apart we are, as long as we’re both hoping to reach the same place, we can still walk the same path. Won’t you come with me again, Allie? Please, lend me your strength. I want you to explore every possibility here on the frontier, for me.”

Without saying anything, he reached up to my hand on his shoulder and wrapped his fingers around it.

We remained that way for a short while, each watching the other. Then slowly, he gave my hand a tight squeeze.

“I never had a dream for myself. There were always too many other brilliant people around me. I always thought I knew what I was capable of, and what I wasn’t… You think I can help you, Sister?”

“I’m asking because I *know* you can, Allie.”

“Even if I don’t believe in myself? Do you really think I can live up to those expectations? How can you trust me if I’m not even confident I can do that?”

“Because I know you, Allie.”

“…What do you mean by that?”

“Giving up your humanity in an attempt to beat me, turning against the whole kingdom to achieve your goals—I might not agree with your methods, but it’s clear you had tremendous resolve.

So you're not powerless, Allie. I didn't give up out of weakness, and neither did you."

"…"

"So I know you can do it, all right? After all, we're brother and sister. We even look alike."

"…Sister."

"No matter how hard it is, no matter how painful, we won't ever give up. I believe in you. I'm sure you'll see this through."

Allie said nothing, simply staring back at me.

I wasn't crying or wavering anymore. Now I could face him with a truly heartfelt smile.

After remaining a short while, Allie chuckled under his breath, apparently unable to contain his laughter. "…You got me there. I've never been a match for you. You're going to give me all the hard tasks, aren't you?"

"Hee-hee-hee. You guessed?"

"There's nothing to guess. This is where I live now, isn't it? I'm sure there's plenty of spirit resources lying dormant around these parts. It will probably take decades of effort to make them available."

"It'll be a lot of work."

"It certainly will. I can't think of anyone off the top of my head who I'd entrust such an important job to."

"I can think of you."

Allie grinned as he let out a light chuckle.

He rubbed the corners of his eyes as he held his hand over his face. It was only a momentary lapse, and he quickly lowered his hand, smiling back at me.

"Sister. Please forgive me."

"…Forgive you?"

"For having the audacity to want to share your dreams once more, after I turned on you."

"We've already made amends, Allie. Can you forgive me, too? For asking you again for your help?"

"Ah. If that's what you want."

We clasped hands and felt each other's presence again, laughing without any worries just like we had as children.

The following day after my nighttime discussion with Allie, those of us who had come here for official purposes met with him again—the difference this time being that Clive was accompanying him.

"We had to interrupt our conversation yesterday, so I'd like to pick up again on our reason for coming here," Euphie began.

"…All right." Allie nodded after first glancing my way.

"As I'm sure you already know, I have been officially adopted by the royal family and have acceded to the throne as queen. As ruler of the Kingdom of Palettia, I intend to improve the status of commoners and their standard of living by spreading knowledge of Anis's magicology and increasing adoption of her magical tools."

"I see. So what do you need?"

"Magicology research and the construction of magical tools both rely on access to spirit stones. We will need a great deal more resources than we presently have access to. There is a fear that our supplies may run dry."

"So you've set your sights on the underdeveloped frontier regions?"

"Indeed. Conditions in this remote area are similar to those in the Black Forest in the northern territories, which is presently our largest mining area. To meet our future needs, I would like to further develop this region as a source of additional spirit resources."

"I understand what you're saying, but there isn't enough manpower here to develop the region that way."

"I'm aware of that. The present count administering this region has only taken over his position as per custom. I doubt he has the expertise necessary to properly develop the land. That is where you come in, Algard Von Palettia."

"…What do you ask of me, Your Majesty?"

"I am willing to pardon you for your crimes—and in exchange, I want you to dedicate yourself to developing this region. Depending on the level of your achievements, you could find yourself the next lord of the frontier."

Allie's brow furrowed slightly at this proposal. Instead of

answering, he just stared.

The rest of us watched on anxiously. After a short moment, it was Allie himself who broke the awkward silence.

“Is that permissible?” he asked. “I rebelled against my father. If you were to pardon me so easily, there are nobles, I believe, who won’t accept it without protest. Am I wrong?”

“Then do you think those nobles would be willing to develop the frontier in your place?”

“I wonder. There are always those with curious interests.”

“I suggest you take a look in the mirror.”

This time, Allie frowned and glared back at Euphie.

She, on the other hand, watched him coolly.

Finally, defeated by her gaze, he let out a deep sigh and rested a hand against his forehead.

“You’ve developed a very sharp tongue,” he murmured.

“Have I any reason to be lenient with you?” Euphie returned lightly.

“Hmm…,” Allie snorted.

“So what do you think? Will you accept my pardon or not? I would like you to give me a clear answer.”

“You’ve changed for the better, you know? You’re very good at hearing people out.”

“Yes, I should hope so.”

“…I would like to accept your proposal with my deepest gratitude. I pledge my unwavering loyalty to you, Your Majesty.” Allie rose from his seat and kneeled before Euphie.

He had declared his willingness to serve as her vassal. Euphie nodded in turn, urging him to lift his face.

“Algard. I hereby relax the terms of your exile, on the aforementioned conditions. Please do your utmost to develop this land, and to advance Anis’s theories of magicology.”

“I vow to serve with all my heart to the end of my days.”

“…I’m afraid I might lose my temper if you keep treating me with such reverence. I don’t mind if you act normally in private.”

“I see. But wouldn’t losing your temper with me better prompt me to seek to mend ties?”

“…If you want to see someone lose their temper, Duke Magenta will be more than enough. I’m going to demand quick results of you. You won’t have time for any more idle jokes.”

“That goes without saying. But once again, I’d like to express

my gratitude. Was it your idea to offer me a pardon and have me develop the frontier? Or did someone advise you to do it?"

"You don't need me to answer that, do you?"

"No… Again, thank you."

"…Not at all. With this, I've repaid my debt. Perhaps you owe me now?"

"Very well. I'll be sure to repay you someday."

"I look forward to it."

With that discussion out of the way, Euphie and Allie exchanged dauntless grins.

For some reason, their interaction reminded me of when Euphie got into one of her debates with Duke Grantz.

…Was it possible that these two were actually on good terms with one another? No sooner had I realized this than I started to think it wasn't funny at all.

I broke into a slight frown; Euphie's eyes widened, and she flashed me a faint smile.

Drawing close, she gave me a soft peck on the cheek. It was so natural and sudden that I didn't have time to stop her, and by the time I realized that she had just kissed me, my face turned bright scarlet.

"E-Euphie! Not in front of everyone!"

"I just thought you looked so adorable, Anis."

"N-no I didn't!"

"…Sister. There's a time and place for romantic indulgences, no?"

"Allie?! No, hold on, *Euphie* kissed *me*!"

"Hah. You think she would let me offer her a word of caution?" Allie crossed his arms and legs as he stared back at me with an inscrutable look.

The others were acting as though they hadn't seen a thing.

"E-Euphie…!" I cried. The indignation was just too much.

"If you want to call me an idiot, remember that you've done so dozens of times already," she responded without the slightest hint of remorse.

"Because you're always doing stupid things…! Ngh…!" I shouted back.

The next time she did something embarrassing in public, I would kick her right out of my bed!

"But, Euphyllia," Allie began, turning back to the subject at

hand. “It’s all well and good to want to develop the land, but that will hardly be possible with the personnel here in this mansion. Will the crown be offering any support in that regard?”

“Of course. I’m hoping we can discuss that as well…,” Euphie said with a nod as she started laying out her plans.

Navre, Halphys, and—surprisingly—Garkie all joined in on the discussion as the talks got underway.

Ilia and Lainie were helping Clive serve tea and snacks to everyone gathered.

Since I wasn’t familiar with the technicalities of actually governing a territory, I was basically left out of the conversation, and so I sat there feeling vaguely out of place.

Garkie was sharing his opinions as a native of the eastern territories close to the frontier, Navre from the standpoint of a knight, while Halphys was drawing on her wide-ranging knowledge and scholarship.

Meanwhile, Euphie and Allie were putting all those thoughts and ideas together, the two of them moving smoothly and promptly from one problem to the next.

…Yes, maybe I should have put more time into studying politics…

The next moment, Allie called out to me, “Ah, that’s right. Sister?”

“Hmm?”

“Some of the people here in the mansion were assigned to keep an eye on me and serve as guards, but there are others who joined us through contracts with the Adventurers Guild. Nothing has been decided yet, of course, but we might have more opportunities for guild members to make money around these parts. I’d like to get a range of views from adventurers themselves, so I wonder if you could talk to them for me?”

“I suppose so… But why me?”

“Apparently there are many adventurers out there who owe you a debt. It would be better if you approached them rather than me, don’t you think? You would probably be able to talk to them more naturally than I could. It will just be idle chat, but I’d appreciate it if you could gauge their reactions.”

“Ah, right. They’ll be looking for a lucrative offer from the nobility, and even with Euphie’s pardon, they might still be on their guard around you.”

“Precisely. So I thought you would be the best choice, as the one they would feel most comfortable around. You’re the right person, so would you do this for me?” he asked with a forced smile and a shrug of his shoulders.

Faced with this, I found myself grinning back at him. It seemed that he had sensed my discomfort at being unable to contribute to the discussion.

So he had given me a job that I could do—talking to various adventurers. I was a little surprised by how considerate he was being.

“In that case, I guess I’ll be off. I do want to hear what the locals have to say about the area anyway.”

“Ah.” Garkie startled. “Then maybe Navre or I should—”

“I’m fine, really. You can help everyone better here by sharing your input, right?”

“…Anis,” Euphie began with a frown, before her expression lightened. “I would like to hear the adventurers’ thoughts, too. I would be grateful if you could sound them out.”

She likewise seemed to have sensed my unease now that Allie had taken steps to relieve it.

“There might even be a few familiar faces out there, so I’ll go say hello,” I said, flashing her a smile so that she wouldn’t worry.

With a light wave of my hand, I made my way to the door.

Hmm. This is something only I can do, so I shouldn’t make everyone worry too much. I’ll have to try to leave this all behind me for the moment.

With that in mind, I stepped out from the room—when I sensed a movement up ahead.

The presence seemed to be farther down the corridor, so I turned my gaze—when out of the corner of my eyes, I spotted a gray tail.

“…Acryl?”

Had she heard everything that we had discussed inside?

After a moment’s hesitation, I approached the area where she had disappeared.

But even after turning down the corridor, I couldn’t see her. Pressing ahead, I glanced around to make sure that she wasn’t hiding in my blind spot.

“Are you there? Acryl? You are, aren’t you?” I called out, but still no answer.

The corridor remained eerily silent.

"You're very good at hiding. But if you try too hard not to be noticed, you'll only end up standing out in a crowded mansion such as this. And besides, I can still see your tail."

"No, you can't!"

"All right, I was lying about that part. But I did know you were there."

The voice sounding from the shadows was unmistakably Acryl's.

She appeared in front of me with a frown, no doubt dismayed that I had managed to work out her hiding place. She fixed me with a glare, her ears perking up and her tail wagging.

"Eavesdropping is hardly appropriate, is it now? If you wanted to listen, you should have just come inside."

"…Al said I was an outsider this time."

"Ah. Well, we were talking about the kingdom's internal politics. He was probably right."

"…You do not fear speaking of him now," Acryl said in a voice that didn't convey much positive emotion.

I couldn't help responding with a smile. "I owe it to you, Acryl."

"Huh?"

"Thank you. For telling me to face him by myself."

Acryl responded to this expression of gratitude as though she couldn't comprehend why I was thanking her.

She simply continued to glare at me, a low growl rumbling in her throat.

Reminding myself to smile, I called out to her, "If you don't mind, can we have a little talk?"

"I *do* mind."

"Oh."

"I despise you."

"Yeah, I know."

"…Are you a fool? I said I despise you."

"You might hate me, but I don't hate you, Acryl."

"Do you jest?"

"Not at all."

She continued to glare, clearly fuming.

If she really didn't want to talk to me, she could have easily left. But she didn't. Either she had a particularly disciplined nature, or else…

“Acryl. Do you like Allie?”

“…What reason have you for such a question?”

“Because I’m curious. This is the first time we’ve met, isn’t it? So there’s only one reason you might hate me, right? Allie.”

“…”

“Was I right? I guess you’ve heard about his past, then?”

A deep chill seemed to dwell within Acryl’s blue eyes.

They reminded me of how Allie’s eyes used to be, and my heart ached for everything that we had lost.

“What…,” Acryl growled in a barely audible voice.

She looked like she wanted to say something, and her mouth moved without forming any further words.

I decided to wait for her to find her voice.

“…What… What *are* you…?”

“…What am I?”

“Were you not evil? Strange you are, yes, but not evil. I cannot abide it.”

“Abide it?”

“What does Al mean to you?”

My eyes squeezed shut at this question. I bowed my head, taking a deep breath to calm my racing thoughts.

“He’s my precious little brother… I wish I could have kept him smiling forever.”

“You lie!” Acryl screamed as if she couldn’t take it anymore, her wolf ears standing up and her fur bristling. “You dare call him precious! You, of all people! Why did you not help him?!”

“…You’re right.”

I accepted her criticisms without arguing. The accusation stung, but it was true.

“Always he waited for you! Always he suffered! Why did you not share his pain?! Is that not the purpose of family?! If he was precious to you, then why did you abandon him?!”

“…You’re right.”

“Would that you were evil, that I could strike you down now! So why…? Why do you not play your part? Al was suffering so much because of you! And you saw nothing; you did nothing to aid him! I despise you…!”

…Ah. Acryl’s criticisms hurt more than I had expected.

They hit like a blow to the face. After all, I *was* the cause of Allie’s suffering. I couldn’t deny it.

I hadn't noticed. I couldn't help him. To an outside observer, it probably did seem implausible that I suddenly cared about him now.

"…You're thinking it doesn't add up, right?"

"…Why do you not object? Why do you not argue in your own defense? You care for Al, do you not?"

"Because it's a fact. Everything that happened between the two of us—there's no turning back the clock. You haven't misunderstood. There's no mistake. It all happened exactly as you said. You have every right to be angry."

"You…!"

"But there's also something you don't understand. Something I want you to know," I said, staring straight into her eyes.

It was true that I had hurt him, and I hadn't been able to help him. But if we were going to talk about what happened, I had to correct her belief that all of it was my fault.

"What you're saying isn't wrong, Acryl. But it isn't the only correct answer, either."

"…What do you mean, then? Did you not just say that I am not wrong?"

"You must have learned growing up that you can be neither right nor wrong, Acryl. Which is why you haven't grasped the full picture."

"…Speak clearly."

"How much do you know about the Kingdom of Palettia, Acryl? This isn't the Lycant village you grew up in. Different places have different norms and customs. The correct answer isn't always what you might expect, either. It might be different depending on where you are."

"…And?"

"If people have different values, they can end up misunderstanding each other through no fault of their own."

Acryl glared at me, ready to lash out at any moment.

But angry though she was, she didn't let her indignation get the better of her.

She was disciplined and earnest, as well as vigilant and considerate. The greater her knowledge, the more opportunities she had to put it to use.

But at the same time, she was too honest and direct—which resulted in her failing to get along with those around her.

Still, I found a spark of hope. So I called out to her, “Acryl. If you don’t mind, do you think we could have a little sparring match?”

“…A sparring match?”

“That might be the easiest way for us to communicate our thoughts to each other. And there’s something I need to tell you. Something I want you to know. I think this will be the best way to get it across. So what do you think?”

Acryl stared at me in suspicion, but I was so earnest that she reluctantly offered up a nod.

I knew where her attitude had come from, and so I couldn’t help breaking out into a smile.

* * *

Acryl and I stepped out into the courtyard. She was armed with her usual choice of weapon, her spear, ready to face me.

“Hey, hey, isn’t that the princess?”

“She’s really here? What’s she doing going up against Acryl?”

A group of adventurers had gathered around the sidelines, watching half out of curiosity, half from worry. As far as I was concerned, there was no issue with them seeing this, so I let them be.

“How’s this for the rules? We’ll have a proper mock battle, fighting for real just without using any fatal attacks. And we can probably overlook a few minor injuries. What do you think?”

“…’Tis a battle. There was no need to say these things.”

“Hmm. But it’s important to lay down the ground rules first. I’m a princess of this country, sister to the queen. If we don’t agree on terms first, there’s a possibility you could be arrested for harming a member of the royal family.”

Acryl broke into a frown, as though to say that all these technicalities were a nuisance. To be honest, I knew exactly how she felt, so I gave her an awkward smile.

“Do you have any idea why we need rules like this, Acryl?”

“…”

“I’ll take that as a yes. It’s the responsibility of the royal family —including me and Allie—to defend the Kingdom of Palettia.”

“Did you not wish to fight so that we could converse? And now

the words never cease… Say no more!" Acryl cried in annoyance before hitting the ground running.

She circled around to my blind spot, her spear lashing out with rapid movements, forcing me to deflect the weapon's tip with my Celestial.

"…?!"

"I saw that."

"Tch!"

Once more, she readied her spear, lunging forward with another swing, this time slashing upward from below.

A heavy jolt ran through my hands as the two weapons made impact, but it was Acryl whose face twisted in dismay. In terms of raw strength, it seemed that I emerged victorious.

"What do you think are the necessary conditions to lead a group of people, Acryl?"

"…Fight me seriously!"

"Strength? Naturally. Wisdom? Of course. You can't lead without those."

Acryl, probably alarmed by the fact that I had successfully parried her attacks twice now, fell back a short distance.

"The fact is, it's hard work being the leader of the Kingdom of Palettia," I continued, readjusting my stance. "And it isn't easy replacing the previous ruler, either. My brother and I were born into the royal family, so we need to be strong, we need to be wise, and we need everyone else to accept us as such. Otherwise no one would follow us."

"…Speak clearly."

"I thought you wanted to know more about Allie, no? This is the burden he's had to carry all this time, which *I* was supposed to carry. So I understand it well. I know what it means to carry a weight of responsibility that you can't throw aside. And I placed it all on his shoulders—because if I hadn't, he might have met an even worse fate."

"…What?"

"Strength is good if you're a leader. So is wisdom, and being recognized by those around you. But if someone else can satisfy all those requirements, why not choose them…? Don't you think, Acryl?"

"That is…true. I suppose."

"But still, royalty like us aren't easily replaced. Yes, strength,

wisdom, recognition—they're all important. But they're not enough to rule over the Kingdom of Palettia. What you need is history."

"History…?"

"Being a mage means using the power of magic to bring peace and prosperity to the realm. That's the first condition of being recognized as a leader of the Kingdom of Palettia, and that talent is passed down through the royal bloodline. So long as that blood runs through Allie's and my veins, we can never leave the royal family. It's the history told by this blood that everyone chooses to follow."

Despite this explanation, Acryl seemed doubtful.

Maintaining my smile, I continued, "You don't understand? In that case, how about this…? You're a Lycant, Acryl, aren't you?"

"So I've said."

"Are you proud of your heritage?"

"Of course."

"What if someone told you that your next chief doesn't have to be a Lycant? What if your next chief said you should change everything about your customs, mingle with other tribes, and abandon being Lycants? Would you still follow them?"

"…They would not be a Lycant, then. I wouldn't follow them. I wouldn't need to."

"Exactly. We have to be mages, just as your leader has to be a Lycant. Otherwise, no one would recognize us as ruler. So if someone became leader without the recognition of those around them, what do you think would happen?"

Acryl flinched at this question. She stood motionless, her mouth pursed in worry. Then, after a pause, she said, "It would all fall apart."

"Correct… And it almost did for us. A lot happened. Many people ended up suffering, and more struggled to stop it all. There are so many people in the Kingdom of Palettia that they couldn't agree on any one solution. They were all trying to accomplish what they thought was best."

With that, I stepped forward and lashed out at Acryl with an attack of my own.

She was hearing me out now, and she readied a defensive stance and parried my blow. I had delivered only a single hit, but it was still a good strike.

Yes, she was no ordinary fighter. If she ever decided to set out as an adventurer, she would fly up the ranks to gold in no time at

all.

I found myself smiling at her high level of ability, then I called out again, “I couldn’t help Allie… If I had tried, one of us might have been killed.”

“…?! Why?!”

“Because I was in the way. I was a problem when it came to the Kingdom of Palettia.”

I poured my energy into the Celestial, expanding its magical blade. Acryl leaped back and away, responding with the fast-paced intuition of a wild beast.

Perhaps taken aback by how narrowly she had dodged the attack, she remained at a greater distance on high alert.

“This magical tool I built is amazing, don’t you think? With this, anyone can use magic.”

“…I have heard of these inventions.”

“Ah. Word gets around, I see. Yes, anyone can use them. Magic itself can only be used by nobles, and in exchange for their promise to protect the common people, they were awarded all kinds of luxuries and privileges. Naturally, they weren’t inclined to accept my inventions. Which was why I couldn’t remain by Allie’s side.”

“…Because he could become an enemy of the nobility, like you?”

“If he had been on my side, people might have thought of him that way, even if he himself didn’t. So I believed I had to keep my distance from him… I thought it was the right thing to do. But in the end, everything turned out exactly the way you said.”

“…So it was for him? Truly? That was why you left him?” Acryl asked quietly, her lips pursed as she shook her head.

“I can’t say it was just for him. Maybe the best course of action would have been to abandon my dreams of magic. I could have chosen not to pursue magicology or build my magical tools… But I didn’t.”

If I had given up on my dreams, I would have had nothing else left. If I had given up there, I would have been a useless princess.

That would have been the death of me. Without any meaning in life, I would have been nothing more than a walking corpse. I could even imagine myself ending my own life.

“Allie and I weren’t fighting each other exactly. What we were fighting was the long, torturous history of the Kingdom of Palettia itself.”

“History…”

“It’s hard to fight, because it doesn’t have a physical form the way monsters do. And during that battle, we both chose our own paths. Neither of us could give way to the other. And so I effectively turned against him.”

I was fighting for the acceptance of my new type of magic, while Allie wanted to destroy the country itself and the magic that ruled it. We each adopted different means, but we both wanted to do *something* to change the national polity.

“That’s why Allie chose to become a vampire.”

“So he could rule the country with the power of one?”

“Yes. But at the same time, that would have meant depriving people of their liberty and free will. I couldn’t stand by and let him do that, whether his reasons were justified or not. And by pushing him aside, that meant I had to take his place.”

The Kingdom of Palettia had prospered, thanks to the protection of magic. I thought that I had no choice but to become queen, even if it meant robbing the kingdom of that vital role.

It was my responsibility, I had concluded, to depose Allie—even at the risk of destroying the country itself. And so I’d made up my mind to shoulder that heavy burden.

“Euphie saved me. Thanks to her, I didn’t need to take it all alone. But yes, you’re right. You must be wondering if I could do all that, why didn’t I save him?”

“…You…”

“Given everything, it’s little wonder you blame me for not having saved him.”

As I said those words out loud, a sharp pain tore through my chest.

“The explanation is simple enough… I was too weak.”

“Aerial System: Dragon Heart.”

Summoning up all my will, I drew from the dragon magic in the Impressed Seal on my back—then released that power all around me, making the air shimmer in transformation.

“…?!”

Acryl’s wolf ears perked up in alarm, her hair standing on end. She took a step back, staring at me as though she didn’t dare look

away.

"…Are you afraid of me?"

"…What… What *are* you? Are you human…?!"

"…I don't know anymore. I don't really care. Look carefully. Let yourself feel this power."

She tried desperately to hide her fear, to keep from being swallowed up by it—while I continued to peer deep into her soul.

"This is me. This is what I'm capable of… And none of it was enough to save Allie."

If I had obtained the dragon's power earlier, might that have made a difference? Would I have been able to change his mind?

I couldn't help wondering. In all likelihood, it might have made the situation even worse by forcing either his hand or someone else's. I might very well have been killed long before our confrontation.

But such speculation could never triumph over reality. There was no going back or changing the past. So long as we were still breathing, we had to keep looking forward.

"Even with all this, there are enemies that can't be beaten. Those are the foes that Euphie, Allie, and I have to fight. Power is essential, but it's not enough by itself. We need more—more strength, more wisdom, more power."

"…!"

"…Allie said he had forgiven me. And that he wanted me to forgive him. He said we would both follow the same path this time around. But I know it's not an easy road. He knows it, too."

I couldn't do it alone. By myself, I would succeed only in resisting the waves of time and change. But I also had Euphie. And Ilia, and Lainie, and so many others crossing paths with me. And because we were all traveling together, we would be able to hold our own against the mighty enemy of history. To build a new age.

"There's a path I want to follow, a road I have to take. That's why I can't protect only Allie. Besides, my protection isn't what he wants or needs anymore."

What he sought now, he had said, was to help me achieve my dreams.

If he was going to support me that way, then I had to do everything I could to help him be a better person.

"From now on, Allie is going to have to carve out a new life for himself and everyone else who lives here on the frontier. I'm sure

there will be endless days ahead spent battling monsters. I can't stay by his side forever. I might have all this power, but I can't wield it all just for him."

"…"

"…What about you, Acryl? You're angry with me for his sake, so I have hope for you—"

"I…!" Acryl nearly interrupted.

Her glare sharpened—but she was no longer frightened. Her gaze bored right through me.

"I do not understand everything you say," she began. "But I believe I do understand the heart of it. Perhaps it is like what we call the Great Current."

"…The Great Current?"

"The world is so much bigger than each of us in it. The Great Current is the will of the world. When the wind blows, when the rain falls—all is according to the Great Current."

"…Ah, yes. I think I understand."

I didn't know if there was really such a thing as the will of the world. From our own perspectives, perhaps we might never know.

The world would go on today, and tomorrow, without any regard for our own lives.

"Sometimes it swallows up life without mercy, but life will always return to the earth in the days that follow. There's no need to mourn its passing. One day, we shall be gone, too. Lamentations won't fill your stomach, nor will they make life any easier tomorrow. And our lives will not end until their time. If we howl and cry while we still have our lives here and now, our hearts will fail us when we need them most," Acryl said without lowering her defensive stance. "I arrived here, I met Al, and our lives connected. All because of the Great Current. I know not where life shall take me in the end, but I've found a place to anchor myself again."

"…I see."

"So I shall live here. Lycants must never forget an act of charity. We must protect our friends no matter the cost. So shall I protect Al."

"You have a strong sense of pride, don't you?"

"Your stream is different from mine. Your way of life is fundamentally different. I can understand, but I cannot sympathize. And I still do not like you. But if Al wishes to live in that stream alongside you, then so shall I. That means I can live with Al…so I

shall try to understand a little more."

…*Ah.* I breathed a sigh of relief.

As Acryl had said herself, her way of life was completely different from my own. And I knew well enough that she wasn't fond of me.

From her point of view, I had hardly protected him. I'd led him down a perilous path.

I had the power to protect him, and yet I used it for other purposes. It was only natural that Acryl wouldn't get along with me; she prioritized defending her family and friends.

Which way of life, I wondered, was the right one?

That question was impossible to answer. I wasn't about to give in, and so the two of us would probably always be at odds. But seeing that she was so much like me ignited a spark of joy in my heart.

"Can I ask you something, Acryl? Do you care about Allie?"

"I do."

"I see. I love him, too. But I guess I might make you angry, saying that."

"Because I despise you."

"I think I could like you, though."

"Do as you please. You are selfish and free, like a wild bird. You care little for what others may want of you. You live not in the same world as us."

"I can't deny that…"

"You are bizarre. But not evil. Perhaps you are even kind. But you are not what I want to be. I cannot go along with your way of life. I do not want that way of life for Al, either."

"Of course."

"But if that is how things are in this country, if that's how Al wants to live, then I will not stop trying to understand it."

"I see."

"We're all part of the Great Current. You as well. I understand some of your words. That the wind moves differently from place to place, that the flowers bloom differently. So I've nothing more to say."

"It's important to have your own outlook and to be able to put it into words. Not everyone is going to think the same way as you, Acryl."

"Anisphia."

For the first time, there was no hostility as she said my name. If anything, her voice betrayed a hint of amazement, perhaps even a little pity.

"…Is it not difficult, living so differently from everyone else?" she asked. "Does it not bring you pain?"

"…Like you said, I'm just part of the Great Current. Don't you think?"

"How troublesome you are. Like a bird flying through the air doing whatever it wills. I like nothing about you."

"Ha-ha-ha. But I do love the sky. That's where I started, after all."

"People cannot fly."

"But they can dream of flying. And you can share that dream with others and let them carry it forward. There are all kinds of possibilities that people haven't even realized yet," I declared.

With this, Acryl gave me a look of sincere displeasure. "…This conversation makes my head spin. Al is pitiable indeed, losing his mind over such a sister."

"Yes, I am worried about that… Which is why there's something I want to ask you, Acryl."

"…Go on?"

"Please—look after him for me."

Her eyes widened slightly at this request, before her lips pursed in an expression of distaste.

I had thought she would react that way, which was why I couldn't help breaking into a faint smile. "Because I'm exactly the kind of person you think I am, Acryl."

"I truly, *utterly* despise you, Anisphia."

"Ah, to be despised…"

"I need no instruction from you. Mind your own business."

"Well, he is my brother."

"Insufferable…!"

"Hee-hee-hee. Let's continue our match, shall we? You'll protect Allie, right? Then show me you've got what it takes."

"I do not need your permission…!" Acryl screamed, charging toward me, while I stepped forward to meet her.

* * *

"…Goodness. What *are* those two doing?" Algard muttered from his vantage point by the window.

"Well, judging by the looks on their faces, I don't think you've got anything to worry about," I answered.

"…You're awfully relaxed, Euphyllia."

In the courtyard below, Anis and Acryl were clashing, sword versus spear. Anis seemed strangely relaxed, while Acryl seemed to be fighting even more aggressively than before.

I had been surprised to find the two of them facing off against each other in combat. Just how much enmity did Acryl have for Anis?

But nervous though I was, the two of them seemed to be talking in the midst of their physical exchange, so perhaps I shouldn't have been so concerned.

Before I knew it, others had gathered around the courtyard. They were either stunned by the fierce contest, dumbfounded by what they saw, or egging one or the other on.

There were probably very few knights who could hope to keep up with such a heated exchange of blows.

The fact that Acryl was holding her own against Anis suggested that she possessed rare talent indeed.

Gark and Navre were among those watching the fight. They were warriors themselves, so I'm sure they found the whole thing quite a sight to behold. It was little wonder they were so engrossed by it.

"…You sure seem to be enjoying yourself, Sister," Algard murmured under his breath.

"She does look like she's having fun, doesn't she?" I whispered in response.

"You remember, don't you? She would always have a word or two of advice for anyone who would hear her out. She was always telling outlandish stories, so it was little wonder no one ever took her seriously. But that's why she was always so eager to take care of someone once they had given her their trust."

"…Ah, yes."

"And now she's essentially coaching Acryl. Acryl always had great physical abilities and fast senses, but she still lacks experience. Besides, my sister knows someone even more adept at wielding a spear."

Who could that be? I stopped to think for a moment, letting out

a chuckle as a certain face popped to mind.

"You mean your mother?"

"Ah. Every now and then, she would punish me or Anis…or rather, throw us into an impromptu training bout."

Yes, my adoptive stepmother—Anis and Algard's mother—certainly was an expert with the spear. Her fighting style, incorporating her masterful use of wind magic, was said to be as strong as my father's. It was still the stuff of legend.

And Anis had constantly found herself in pitched training bouts against her, ostensibly as a form of discipline.

"I thought she didn't get along with Acryl, but they don't look too unfriendly…"

"Hmm. I wonder…"

Anis didn't seem to hold any particular grudge, but what about Acryl? Though partway into their conversation, her hostility seemed to have lessened somewhat.

That being said, they still didn't exactly appear to be on good terms. Even now, Acryl was lashing out with her spear in frustration, while Anis seemed to be enjoying brushing those strikes aside.

"…Watching this, it brings back so many memories," Algard said.

"Memories?"

"I never fought a mock battle against her, but her expression right now—it reminds me of when she used to tell me about her research progress and new discoveries."

Algard's smile was serene, his eyes following Anis's every move.

…Something about it rubbed me the wrong way, and I frowned as I recognized it for what it was—jealousy.

"You've started acting a lot like she used to, I've noticed," he remarked.

"Oh?"

"It was a long time ago. You can't look after yourself if you let yourself get jealous all the time."

My brow wrinkled even further at the sight of that mean-spirited smile.

Ah, I really couldn't stand this man or anyone like him. Especially my father.

"I can say it out loud now," I whispered. "I'm glad—I really am—that I didn't marry you."

“I could say the exact same thing.”

We met each other’s eyes, then let out annoyed sighs.

We could tolerate each other so long as we were discussing work or official matters, but on a personal basis, we never quite meshed.

“Euphyllia.”

“…What?”

“I’m grateful to you.”

“Oh?”

“It’s hard reining my sister in, isn’t it? She’s free-spirited. And a heretic, as far as the realm is concerned. I was always afraid that things might get out of hand with her.”

“…I can’t say it’s easy, but you don’t need to worry.”

“No?”

“She has me to look out for her. All of me. So we’ll be fine.”

“…I see,” Algard muttered, looking taken aback. “Euphyllia,” he continued at last. “Maybe I should be addressing you as my stepsister from now on?”

“…Are you trying to get on my bad side?” I asked with a shudder, goose bumps popping up all over my body.

As I rubbed my arms, Algard glanced my way. I suppose he didn’t mean to upset me.

“You don’t need to talk like that. I was trying to be considerate.”

“In what way? It’s like you’re trying to pick a fight.”

“What? I see. I just thought if you were to think of me as your stepbrother, you wouldn’t need to worry about being so considerate all the time.”

“…I don’t.”

“You act like you don’t know how to behave around me. Yes, I used to be a prince, but you’re queen. You’re not used to the fact that our roles are now reversed, are you? You might be doing well as sovereign, but you still act like a child at times.”

“*I’m* acting like a child?”

“You’ll have to do something to hide your newfound sense of jealousy before you try defending yourself.”

“Ngh…!”

I couldn’t even explain myself here!

“…All right, yes. I certainly don’t have the decency to be courteous to someone as ill-natured as you.”

“I don’t make a good little brother. At best, I’d be the kind of brother who plays along with his sister’s cunning tricks.”

“…Yes, I know,” I said with an exasperated sigh.

At least it was probably a good thing that he could actually admit as much.

“Leave Anis to me, Algard. You should just do as you please. You were never a good role model. You’re far too disagreeable.”

“…Euphyllia. You realize you’re sounding more and more like your father?”

“I take that as an insult.”

“…I can’t make heads or tails of you…” Algard chuckled with that mean-spirited laugh of his.

In what way did I resemble my father? That vicious workaholic whose only human interest was to make fun of others never failed to vex me.

I sincerely hoped that Caindeau would grow up to be a strong and forbearing individual like our mother, not a twisted young man like the one before me. Perhaps I would have to drive the point home the next time I saw him.

“…You’ve changed, really,” Algard muttered while I stood there deep in thought.

“Oh? That’s because I’m constantly needing to accept so many changes myself.”

“No doubt.”

There was no need to name the individual constantly inspiring me to adopt those new ways of thinking.

“…And how do I look to you?” Algard asked. “I suppose I’ve changed, too.”

“…I would say all but the things I most wanted to see changed in you have evolved.”

“Are you always this sarcastic? You’re a delightful conversationalist, that’s for sure.”

“I didn’t become the person I am now for your amusement.”

“Ah, that’s fine. I just wanted to talk to help take my mind off things. Before, I couldn’t stop thinking that everything I had ever been given was some kind of oppressive curse.”

“…Really? How about now?”

In the past, Algard had regarded his talent for magic, the gifts that he had received to one day be the realm’s future king, and even the feelings of others toward him as a curse.

He had hidden his emotions behind an unsmiling mask. But now…

“I think it’s a miracle you still believe in me after all my mistakes. And I’ve rediscovered the joy of being loved. I’m free to be who I am now. So I’ve come to accept all those things as blessings now.”

“…I see.”

“I guess there’s only a fine line separating blessings and curses. It’s up to each person to decide which one it is.”

“Yes, I agree. So I offer you my blessings, with all my heart. I’m sure Anis will be pleased to hear it, too.”

“…Right. That’s another relief,” Algard said, turning his gaze up to the sky.

I did the same and squinted against the dazzling light.

We were simply holding on to the precious time we had.

All things, good and bad, must come to an end—and so our inspection tour was likewise reaching its conclusion.

Today was the day we left Allie's mansion. From here, it was almost a straight trip back to the royal capital.

Both Allie and Acryl had come to see us off.

"We had a good talk. We'll work to get things moving as soon as we're back in the capital," Euphie said.

"Ah. I'll start making preparations so we're ready as soon as we receive the go-ahead," Allie answered.

The two seemed to be referring to Euphie's plans to put Allie in charge of developing the frontier regions.

The two had always had a deep understanding of each other's political acumen. Indeed, their discussion seemed to have been quite fruitful, and they were both in good moods.

"Euphyllia," Allie said, reaching out for a handshake.

At this gesture, Euphie froze up for a moment, pausing to take a deep breath before offering her hand with a smile.

"…I'm going to have you make up for all the terrible things you've done to me."

"What…? Ugh…!"

Still grinning, Euphie seemed to be pouring all her strength into her grip.

Allie's eyes widened in momentary consternation, but he must have put two and two together as he quickly stopped resisting.

Both Lainie and Navre were watching them with soft, wry smiles.

Apparently satisfied, Euphie finally let go.

Waving his sore hand a few times, Allie shifted his gaze to the two onlookers. "…Lainie, Navre. All the best to both of you, too. I'll be praying for your futures."

"Take care, Master Algard."

"I wish you good fortune, too."

During our stay, both Lainie and Navre had apparently found time to speak with him as well.

Thanks to that, they seemed to have rekindled their past

friendships to some degree, and they had exchanged friendly words on several occasions since.

All this reconciliation was boding well. I was especially glad that we had brought Navre with us.

"Sister," Allie called out, turning his gaze to me.

Our eyes met—and for some reason, we stared at each other with awkward smiles, neither of us breaking the silence.

Yes, it would probably still take a bit of time before we could address each other normally.

"Allie," I said at last.

"Ah."

"I'll come visit you again."

Perhaps it would have been better to just wish him good luck, but those were the words I wanted him to take to heart.

I would see him again. It was a promise. This wouldn't be our final meeting. And I had to say it out loud to give it the weight of truth.

Every time I felt it, I started thinking, I *would* be able to see Allie again. I had discovered that freedom. And that discovery filled me with uncontrollable joy.

As I broke into a smile, Allie grinned back at me.

"See you again, Sister."

"Of course."

Those were our only words for each other, but they were enough.

This wouldn't be our last encounter. When we next met, I hoped we would be able to speak more easily. And that hope alone gave me newfound confidence.

After saying my farewells to Allie, I turned next to Acryl, who was watching on disinterestedly by his side.

We had had a few more practice bouts since our initial one, though I had come out on top in them all. All those times my mother had pitted herself against me had paid off. And compared to my mother, Acryl was still a little rough around the edges.

But that was just another way of saying that she showed great potential. She knew how to handle a spear, and if Allie started developing the territory in earnest, she would find further opportunities to improve.

She would get stronger and stronger—and that would make her a steadfast partner for Allie.

“See you again, Acryl.”

“Or never, if you do not come back.”

“Don’t say that! Let’s have another training bout sometime. If you lose, you’d better be ready to let me pet you, though.”

“You shan’t lay another finger on me!” she cried. Her fur was bristling, and yet she was hiding behind Allie.

Her ears and tail were so soft that I couldn’t help myself—of course I wanted to pet them! She really didn’t like it, though, so she let me do it only when I beat her in one of our contests.

“You’re still growing, Acryl. Make sure you eat well, so the next time we meet, you’ll be a splendid young lady.”

“I do not need you to tell me so.”

“Just call me Anis already. I’m Allie’s older sister, after all.”

“No.”

“You’re cute when you’re stubborn.”

“Ngh…!”

“Please don’t tease Acryl too much, Sister,” Allie said in exasperation.

I broke into a smile, seeing the young Lycant hiding behind my brother.

“Hee-hee. Then I’ll be off before you get too mad at me, Allie. You’re awfully sweet to girls who dote on you.”

“…What are you implying?”

“Nothing? I’m not thinking anything strange.”

“…Just so you know, I have no such feelings for a child,” he said tiredly.

“Ngh.” Behind him, Acryl’s eyes were watering with despair.

It sure would be fun if I could let out a bellowing laugh, but I was afraid how the other two might react. I had to fight to keep it inside.

“Hee-hee. Don’t fight, you two.”

“Just get going already.”

“We do not need your concern.”

“You two *are* so cute together, though…”

I pretended to be sad, but the two shot me offended looks. *Hmph! Not like I care!*

“Acryl?”

“…What?”

“Take care of Allie for me, would you?”

I had to say it.

From here on out, Acryl would be his friend and supporter. She would stand by his side more than anyone else and fight to protect him both physically and mentally.

To this girl who was setting off down the path that I had not, I offered my heartfelt prayers and blessings. I had high hopes for her.

It was probably far too late for this, and I hardly had the right to do so, but I wanted to offer them a wish—that Acryl would be a blessing to Allie, and that his future path would bring joy, too.

"Anisphia," Acryl called out, saying my name at last.

But that was all she said. She just looked me straight in the eye and gave me a nod. No further words were necessary.

A deep sense of relief rose up inside me. She understood. And she had accepted it.

"See you, then," I said with a nod—my final words of farewell.

I approached the others, waiting a short distance ahead. Euphie was already astride the Airdra, so I positioned myself behind her with my arms wrapped around her waist.

After checking that I was securely seated, she nodded one last time to Allie and Acryl.

Then, a weightless sensation took hold as the Airdra carrying us and the others' Airbikes left the ground.

After gaining altitude, we took off over the forest, leaving the frontier behind us.

* * *

She was a strange one, that's for sure. I couldn't work her out until the very end.

I mused to myself as I watched them disappear across the sky.

She had flown in like a bird, and she had left just as suddenly. Free-spirited, elusive, and mysterious to the end.

"My sister must have given you quite a headache, Acryl."

"…Hmm. I am glad she has gone. I hope she does not return for some time."

"Ha-ha. So she's earned your enmity?" Al chuckled as he watched them shrink into tiny vanishing dots.

He was squinting softly, as if focusing on lingering regrets and memories, though his expression was satisfied. I couldn't say I quite liked seeing it.

“Al.”

“Hmm?”

“I’m not a child. I shall grow up soon. And I’m already very strong.”

So there’s nothing to worry about.

He was my savior at the end of a long, despairing journey. There could be no doubt about it—our meeting was all thanks to the Great Current.

This wasn’t the Lycant forest, but it was still teeming with life and people determined to survive.

My knowledge would surely prove useful to them. And I would be able to draw on my pride and strength as a Lycant. Maybe then I would be able to repay my debt to Al. Would he appreciate my help? Would he let me stay by his side if I proved myself useful?

I found myself envying the way he looked at Anisphia. So…

“…Then grow up fast so that I don’t end up treating you like one,” he answered as he placed a hand on my head.

This difference in height was more than a little vexing.

You saved me, Al. You showed me a brand-new world. I know being alone hurts, even if you wish to pretend otherwise. You wished to hide what was in your heart, even though you were suffering.

You wanted her to stay, did you not? What you truly desired was to go with her. Because she’s your sister. She’s family.

Anisphia was like a bird—a completely different creature than a girl from a Lycant village.

Al was fascinated by airborne creatures, but they left him uneasy, too. So I wanted to take his hand and show him that I was standing firmly on the earth.

I wanted to live here with him. I wanted to understand the burden he was carrying. If I could do that, I would be able to become one with this land.

Because I wanted to live here with him. I wanted him to see me as family.

“I want to grow up soon…”

If that was what it took for me to stand beside him, I would wish for it from the bottom of my heart.

* * *

Our journey by air was progressing smoothly, and in seemingly no time at all, we had left the whole frontier region behind us.

I turned to face forward as I hugged Euphie, leaning against her back as she piloted the Airdra.

"Anis? What's wrong?"

"Hmm… Nothing."

I tightened my arms around her waist and rested my forehead against her back.

I couldn't see, but I sensed that she had broken out into a soft smile. Then, glancing over her shoulder, she said, "Anis. How did you find the tour?"

"Hmm, well… I guess it got me thinking about a lot of things."

"Yes, I could say the same."

"I'm glad I got to see Allie again, though."

"Then you're admitting I was right to choose the frontier as our final stop?"

Our discussions with him had turned out to be especially fruitful. As was to be expected, he had provided many useful insights stemming from all the training and preparation he had received to one day rule as king.

At times, he had offered insightful opinions that took even Euphie by surprise, and he had suggested steps that we might adopt so that people would accept her reforms without resistance.

"He told me you were too well behaved, Euphie."

"…His heart is pitch black. He really can be mean-spirited at times," she snorted in response.

I couldn't help letting out a laugh.

Had I just worked out what kind of relationship the two of them had? Were they the type to constantly snipe at each other?

I didn't mind if that was the driving force behind their discussion, but Euphie's attitude reminded me of how she dealt with Duke Grantz. It was hilarious.

"But we *can* count on him…," she added. "And we may have to ready ourselves for dealing with the Kingdom of Cambus, too."

"We know so little about them… And its home to Lycants like Acryl…"

"Our primary concern will have to be the existence of vampires there," Euphie muttered gravely.

I nodded in agreement. Acryl's escape from a coven of vampires was what had precipitated her arrival in the Kingdom of Palettia,

and she had testified that they had forced her to continuously fight against certain *things*.

"Whatever they were, she thought they were monsters of a kind…"

"We lack specifics. What is their objective? Why have they been abducting people from outside clans and forcing them to fight monsters? And what in the world *are* those monsters? There are too many unknowns. No, we will have to remain vigilant."

"I guess in that sense it's a good thing Allie and Acryl are so close to the border…"

"Developing the area will be an urgent task, but we will have to prepare soon in case those vampires decide to turn on us. Upon our return, we should consult with our fathers how best to proceed."

It was a disturbing thing that we had learned, but at least the advance warning would allow us to prepare for any future encounters.

Yes, now that we had learned of vampires other than Lainie and Allie, we would have to be on full alert.

There were security considerations as well, so we would need to discuss the situation with others familiar with the matter, too. Lainie, for her part, was eager to help ready countermeasures, so she would be an immense help in the days to come.

"I suppose I'll concentrate on vampire counterstrategies for the time being, then," I mused.

"I would appreciate that. I'll ask Lainie to help, if need be…"

"Yes. Maybe it would have been best if we had explained the situation with her to Halphys and the others sooner? We'll have to decide who we can tell and who we can't."

"I think we can trust everyone who joined us on this tour, at the very least."

I was still worried, but we had options. We would just have to apply ourselves and be ready for whatever happened.

But it wasn't all bad. I now had Allie on my side, ready to help me acquire new spirit resources and prepare against future vampire incursions.

"I can't wait to tell Father and Mother how Allie is doing. And I'll have to tell them about Acryl, too!"

"She's a nice girl, isn't she?"

"I'd like to get to know her a bit better, though."

"…What do you mean exactly?"

“As a potential future sister-in-law, I guess?”

“Oh dear…”

Talking with Euphie, my words flowed out like a waterfall from my heart.

“Euphie?”

“Yes? What is it, Anis?”

“You know, this wasn’t my first time coming to the east.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that.”

“I thought I already knew it. But coming out here with you, it made me realize there was so much to learn.”

“…Is that a good thing?”

“Yeah. I’m really glad we went on this trip.”

Even seeing the same scenery again, I had been able to look on it all with a fresh perspective.

On this simple flyby, I had learned so much, changing my very outlook on the region.

“You know, Euphie…”

“Yes?”

“I want to spread my magicology and inventions, and I want to help expand everyone’s horizons. I want everyone to know the joy of magic. So I want to usher in an era where everyone can use it—I really do.”

There were still parts of the kingdom that remained the way they had been for centuries past.

There was this region, ravaged by monsters, with questionable prospects for revitalization, but where the people still stood strong.

And I had been able to meet Allie again here. My brother, who had promised to lend me his strength to pave the way into the future.

“Euphie. Do you think everyone will recognize me as a mage after all this?”

Though I had once held that dream dear, I had given up on it long ago.

But I *did* want to be a mage and to be recognized as such. And I wanted everyone to feel the wonder of magic. I wanted them all to see that there was hope for the future, and I wanted to see them all wearing brilliant smiles.

Those wishes been reduced to a smoldering ember, but they were still dear to me. I had to hold that ember close to keep it from going out.

Its heat was proof of who I was. The comments of others had pushed me to give it up, and I had told myself it existed only for me—and that lie had become a mask that I couldn't pull off on my own.

It was Euphie who had helped remove it, and now my dreams were flowing inside me once more like fuel to reignite my smothered passions.

My heart raced with anticipation—and worry. What if that light was about to be extinguished all over again?

All this time, I could only hold on tight, fighting to keep it from going out. But what about now? Had things changed?

"I recognize you as a mage, Anis."

"…Euphie."

"So hold your head up high."

…Ah. She had just said what I had always wanted to hear.

"Many nobles are starting to acknowledge you, too. And the people, once they have a chance to actually hold your gifts in their hands, will as well."

Every one of those words fueled my dream, making it grow larger and larger.

"It certainly won't be smooth sailing," Euphie added. "It isn't easy to change a country, let alone the world."

I would have to stay strong, and passionate, and flexible, and I would breathe into my dreams to give them life. And that breath would give them wings.

"So remember, Anis. I'll always be by your side."

I wasn't alone anymore. So many times I had been reminded of that fact. Now I could finally bring myself to accept it.

I turned my face up to the sky—endlessly blue, endlessly wide.

It was my favorite place of all—the place that had set me free.

With Euphie, I could now savor happiness as we soared through that wide-open freedom. Filled with gratitude and the deepest love, I hugged her tightly.

"I'm so happy I met you," I said.

"I'm glad I met you, too."

"…I want to stay with you forever, Euphie."

I rubbed my forehead against her back like a spoiled child. It

was a pity I couldn't touch more of her while we were flying.

I would put my thoughts into words—words that she would always remember.

"I love you, Euphie."

More than anyone, more than anything, I loved her.

I felt Euphie tense up slightly after my confession.

Then she let out a deep sigh. If she hadn't been driving the Airdra, she might have completely slumped down in exhaustion.

"…You're a handful, Anis."

"Huh? What? I couldn't hear you, Euphie?"

"…I can't wait to get home."

"Huh? Why?"

"So I can lock you in my room and love you from the bottom of my heart. You had better be ready when we get back."

"Wait, what?! You said you're going to put me away?! Is that what you said?!"

And we continued to banter as we soared through the sky—faster than ever before, higher than ever before, farther than ever before. Our trip might have been over, but the journey had barely begun.

As we continued on that journey, we would keep on dreaming that, someday in the future, everyone might be able to share in our excitement.

Hi there, Piero Karasu here. Thank you so much for picking up the fifth volume of *The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady*.

It's been a year since the release of the fourth volume, so I'd like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my readers for all your patience.

Volume 5 is all about Anis and Euphie's honeymoon, doubling as an official inspection tour! Since much of the story generally takes place within the walls of the royal palace, they don't often have a chance to venture outside. It was reinvigorating to be able to give new opportunities to our two heroines this time around.

And of course, we have the reunion between Anisphia and Algard. It's finally time for them to mend their relationship and set off on their own distinct paths.

The relationship between these two isn't one that can be described in a single word. It's the end result of good intentions gone awry; both of them were swept apart by their environment. Without meaning to, they both hurt each other and lost sight of what they wanted to be.

Wounds like theirs don't heal easily, and past mistakes have a tendency to resurface in the form of bitter memories.

But I believe that if we keep moving forward, bit by bit, and never stop, we will all find a new way forward. Time, perhaps, can solve these kinds of problems.

So I believe the most important thing in life is to keep moving forward. Anis and friends may feel lost or worried, but they will keep pushing onward, aiming for grand dreams.

And speaking of grand dreams, *The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady* is now scheduled for an anime adaptation!

It's only thanks to your support, my dear readers, that we've been able to make this dream come true! I want to thank you all from the deepest depths of my heart!

We'll have more information to announce in the future, but I hope that you all look forward to watching it!

With that, it's time to rest my pen. I hope to see you all again soon in the next volume.

Piero Karasu

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